

A Taste of Love

Eat, Love, Vegan
(Recipes for Love and Life)

A Novel

Joanna Slodownik

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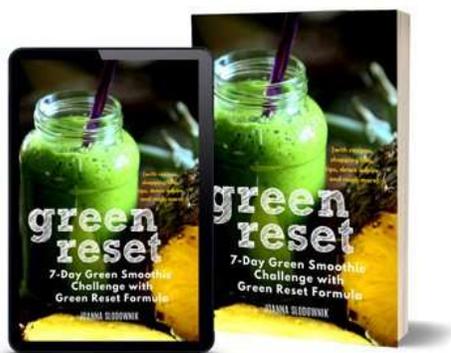
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Get a free excerpt of the “Hearts on Fire (Dogs, Love, and Heroes; Calendar Men),” the “7-Day Green Reset Challenge” ebook (with my recipes, shopping lists, tips, detox advice, and more), plus be notified about hot new releases.

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DEDICATION:

To Dad

GreenPoint, New York, January 7th

I jump out of bed at the crack of dawn, ready for battle. Things still need to be done before reopening the restaurant tomorrow. After the past couple of days, I'm exhausted but also excited that the finish line is so close.

There is hope for the White Eagle, my father's restaurant, that has been in my family for two generations!

It's another big day today. The eXtreme Restaurant Makeover team will keep working their magic on the interior. The renovation is coming to an end, and the transformation is being filmed as the big finale of the season.

Even though I'm not supposed to see inside the restaurant before the reveal, I want to be there with everybody else. Feeling antsy about whether it'll be ready on time, and dying to know how it all turned out, I couldn't just sit at home doing nothing.

When I arrive, the crew and the staff are inside, running around like crazy, but I know there's a method to this madness. There's still a lot to be done; in addition to painting the walls, refurbishing the floors, updating the décor, there's furniture to arrange, food to prep, silverware to polish, tables to set. I want to talk to Russell, hoping he'll calm me down and reassure that everything is going according to the plan, but he's nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly, I feel pressure in my abdomen and an urgent need to use the bathroom. To do that, I would need to pass through the area where I shouldn't be.

Oh, well. I'll be quick.

Covering my eyes with both hands, so I can only see the floor, I sneak inside, trying my best not to look around. Once in the bathroom, I catch a glimpse of my face in the mirror and realize I forgot to put on some makeup. I'm pale like a ghost and my hair is in total chaos.

As I make myself presentable again with a touch of mascara and red lipstick, I contemplate the events of the past two weeks.

My dad's heart attack and his request that I take over the restaurant until he gets better took me completely by surprise.

And then, getting on the eXtreme Restaurant Makeover show...

All in all, it's been a crazy rollercoaster ride.

I take a deep breath in and finish off the look by pulling my hair into a ponytail. and blowing air on my bangs on a deep exhale. Breath

in and out. Feeling calmer, I step outside and take a look around.

Something doesn't look right. The place that was bustling with activity just minutes ago suddenly seems abandoned. The television crew is gone, and even our staff is nowhere to be seen.

"That's odd," I mutter and peek inside the restaurant.

I'm not supposed to be there, but who cares?

Judging by the mess, the makeover is far from finished. There's still over twenty-four hours to the reveal, but it doesn't look promising.

Why is everybody taking a break, all of a sudden?

I step outside and notice a cameraman packing some stuff into a van. "Hi, there!" I wave at him. "Where is everybody?"

He shrugs. "Didn't they tell you?"

"Tell me what?" I ask.

"We got summoned to another location. We were told we were done here—"

"What do you mean, done? Done as in—finished?" I ask incredulously. "Does this look finished to you?!" I exclaim.

He shakes his head, looking at me like he's scared.

He should be. Scared as hell. Just as I am.

"People will start coming in just a couple of hours," I explain, as calmly as I can. I shouldn't be screaming at the poor guy; it obviously isn't his fault. Besides, there must be a logical explanation for this. They're in some secret meeting, probably.

The renovation crew manager, Zach Miller, appears from behind the van and says, "Done as in canceled. We're here to pick up our stuff."

I shake my head. "But that's impossible!"

He shrugs. "Something about the ratings being low and the sponsors wanting to go with a different restaurant for the season's finale," he says and resumes packing the equipment.

"But how can you leave me like this? And where's Russell?"

My cell phone plays a jingle. I don't have to check to know it's my mother. It may be something important about my father, but I can't talk to her now. Thinking about my dad makes me even more nervous.

I can't disappoint him. I must take care of this mess right now!

"Mom, sorry, I can't talk right now. I'll call you back," I say into the phone and disconnect. I turn to Zach. "I must talk to Russell right now!" I demand.

"He left an hour ago. He asked me to tell you he was very sorry."

Sorry?

He's sorry?

He can't be serious.

What a jerk!

He left me with this mess and didn't even have the decency to tell me in person. To think that I was beginning to fall for this guy.

I even considered breaking up with Leo over him!

Was I out of my mind?!

Did I really want to break up with my boyfriend of many years for this irresponsible jerk with an inflated ego?

My phone buzzes. It a text from Russell that reads: "Don't worry, Aleksandra; I'll get everything straightened up immediately."

Staring at my phone, I blink back my tears, hoping I'll wake up from this nightmare to find out that it was just a bad dream.

I pinch myself hard, but the nightmare continues.

How in the world did I get into this mess?

The grand opening is tomorrow, and I have no idea how I am going to make it happen. My brother was right. This whole makeover idea was a huge mistake.

But what am I supposed to tell my father?

He'll be so disappointed in me. Again.

He wanted me to save the restaurant, not ruin it!

1.

Two weeks earlier,
New York City, December 24th

As I walk out into the street from the office building on 38th street, the ice-cold air of December afternoon hits me with full force, and I open my mouth like a fish out of water. I exhale deeply, enjoying the steam coming out of my lips. After another stressful day at work, I'm glad to be outside but have no time to waste. I still have lots to do before I go to my parents' house for the Christmas Eve supper.

It's a Polish tradition to have a meal together after the first star appears on the sky the night before Christmas.

My friends and I have a little tradition too. Each year on that day, we meet at the ice rink by the Rockefeller Center to look at the store displays, admire the beautifully decorated tree, and, of course, to skate.

New York can be so pretty at this time of the year. Everything looks as if straight from a fairy tale or a Hallmark holiday card. The lights, store windows decorated with Christmas trees and beautiful ornaments, and even the snow showed up just in time to adorn everything with a thick coat of pristine whiteness. Pure magic!

Like in a romantic comedy, my favorite kind of movie, I wait for Santa Claus to grant the heroine (me!) her wish, which would be... what? A new job? More money?

I'm not really sure.

Since I already have a boyfriend, letting a cute stranger sweep me off my feet is not on my wish list. Usually, those kinds of clichés would make me want to roll my eyes, and my friends would laugh at me even though they enjoy rom-coms too (in fact, we often watch them together); but on days like this, I let myself get lost in the moment.

I scan the crowd for Kristina, Grace, and Anya, my best friends, who are supposed to meet me by the ice rink but are late. Must be the holiday traffic, I guess.

The Rockefeller center used to be our meeting spot, but the place is overcrowded nowadays with thousands of locals and tourists flocking

to see the window dressings, holiday decorations, and the tree. I think of the year before when I had to push through the crowd like a quarterback during a football match, just to get to the rink, almost getting squashed in the process—an exasperating experience. Not that I ever played football, but that's how I imagined it would feel. That's why I gave in to my friends' suggestion to change our meeting place to the rink in the Chelsea area. As much as I loved the angels lining up the way to the tree, it just wasn't worth it.

What I wanted to do on Christmas Eve is skate.

Skating on Christmas Eve was my family tradition, and the location wasn't important. Every winter, we used to go skating with my mom, dad, my older sister, and younger brother. I loved goofing around with them. My dad wasn't a great skater, but he sure knew how to make us laugh. But ever since my dad became too old and heavy to skate (his words, not mine), and my siblings too busy to be bothered with such a childish past time, I started going with my friends.

I feel a pang of worry, thinking about my dad. He puts up an act like everything is okay, but he won't fool me. I can feel something is off. He's usually rather secretive and not the type to complain, the trait we both share, so what could it be? Maybe problems at the restaurant?

I take out a pair of old skates from my bag, put them on, and cautiously step onto the rink. The first few moves I feel wobbly and unstable, and I almost knock down a penguin. I do a double-take. The penguin turns out to be a boy, learning to skate with his mom. "Sorry!" I mumble an apology.

Looking for space, I glide to the center of the rink. A new song begins, and I recognize the melody in an instant. I love that song! We used to skate to that song with my father. The music relaxes me, and my movements become more confident and fluid.

"Whoosh!" A sudden rush of air behind me throws me off balance, and when I turn around, I see a man coming out of a pirouette. He's good, I think with a tad of envy. I used to be good too, I remind myself, deciding to ignore him. Show off!

"Okay, nice and easy," I mumble under my breath. I'm getting into the rhythm now and dare to try a jump. On the first attempt, my skates don't even leave the rink.

Oh boy, am I rusty!

I keep scanning the crowd for my friends. *What's taking them so long?* With a corner of my eye, I notice Grace and Anya, striking a

yoga pose. (Anya is notorious for it and has an Instagram account filled with snapshots of her body in various stages of contortions.)

I raise my hand to wave at them when—

BAM!

A collision with a solid object ejects me from my trajectory.

With a heavy thump, I land on my butt, as the momentum of the turn keeps me sliding into a slushy ice-water puddle.

“Nooo!” I bellow, trying to avoid getting soaked. My efforts are futile, and soon freezing-cold water gets under my clothes, a temperature shock to my warm skin.

“Damn,” I growl and look up at the culprit, but can’t see his face. My eyes are at the height of his behind, a rather cute behind, I note, feeling annoyed. “Hey! Watch it!” I exclaim.

He turns around and bends down to look at me, his front equally good looking and vaguely familiar. *Do I know him?* I try to remember where I’ve seen him but can’t.

“I’m so sorry. Let me help you.” He offers me his hand in a courteous gesture. Oh, boy, I chuckle as I struggle clumsily to get up. Is Santa going to appear from the sky, riding his sleigh and sprinkling his magic? I can’t help but smile wryly at my thoughts.

“Oh, so you’re okay,” he says. “And you find this amusing?”

“Yes. I mean, no. Somewhat,” I say. Ignoring his hand, I try to get up but slip again.

Reaching out to hold on to him, I almost take him down with me. At the last moment, I grab him, and he grabs me back, and for a long moment, we hold each other in an awkward embrace like two sumo wrestlers on a ring. Or Emperor penguins balancing their eggs, as I saw in a nature documentary the other day. The mother lays the egg and goes back to water to feed. Before doing so, she passes the egg to the father, who balances it on his feet. It mustn’t fall on to the ice or it might freeze.

I don’t want to fall down either. “Sorry,” I mumble and chuckle uneasily at my clumsiness.

“I should be the one apologizing,” he says and helps me stand up on my feet. Then he stares at me as I straighten my clothes and shake the snow off my sweater and pants.

“May I?” he points to my behind, “You still have snow on your back.”

“No, thanks. I’m fine.” Does he really think I will let a stranger

smack my butt in public, no matter how cute he is?

“In that case, may I ask you for a dance?”

I look at him incredulously and laugh. “After you almost left me crippled the day before Christmas?”

He makes a sad face and opens his eyes wide like a puppy. “I’m sorry for any physical pain and discomfort I may have caused you. You won’t sue me or anything?”

Really? That’s his line? Is he some kind of a celebrity or a lawyer? I squint my eyes at him.

Is that me or he’s getting cuter by the minute?

“I saw you doing those jumps. You’re good. Not many people who come here are at this level. Please?”

The compliment and his gaze almost make me blush. My butt is wet and cold (I feel the snow melting under my sweater and making its way into my underwear), but for some reason, I feel hot. What’s going on? Must be the magic of Christmas, the sarcastic voice in my head rattles.

The tune ends, and a new one begins.

“Don’t you just love this song?” he extends his hand to me in an inviting gesture, glancing back toward the Christmas tree, as if looking for someone.

I listen to the first couple of beats. It’s another one of my favorites.

“Okay. Sure! Why not?” I take his hand and follow him to the center of the rink.

Hesitant at first, I quickly get into the flow. The stranger is really good; his arm firmly around my back, he leads me in a way that makes it easy for me to shine. After all, I used to be good at this. I took classes—both figure skating and gymnastics—but then quit, even though the instructor said I showed promise. Maybe with a partner like this, I’d continue training and even win an Olympic medal? I tried many things in life but didn’t have the persistence to pursue any of them long enough to achieve real success, according to my father.

When the song ends, people around us cheer. I haven’t even noticed that we have an audience. People are taking photos and taping us with their phones.

Were we that good, or is he some celebrity? I wonder. He bows to the audience, as I attempt to wiggle out of the crowd, feeling camera shy, but he holds me firmly by my hand.

He looks back at the tree again. This time I follow his gaze and see

a couple, their heads close together, kissing each other and smiling. The woman glances in our direction with an odd expression, and it occurs to me that my skating partner and the woman know each other. The woman winks and smiles, and then the stranger does something I neither expect nor am ready for. He turns around to face me, pulls me toward him so close the buckle of his belt presses hard against my belly, then he bends down to kiss me.

Instinctively, I duck, turning my head to the side, so his mouth lands near my ear.

Whoa! What just happened? I gasp from shock, as the stranger, still holding me tight, adjusts his aim and kisses me on the lips. And it isn't some friendly peck on a cheek, either. I try to break free, but the full-blown, hard-pressed, wet kiss takes my breath away. I don't remember kissing anybody like that in a long time, not even my boyfriend, who, by the way, should be here any minute now.

I push the stranger away, not wanting him to know the impression he made on me, sweeping me off my feet, literally.

Finally, he lets me go.

"I'm sorry," he says, seeming as surprised as I am with what just happened. The crowd around us goes wild, and even more phones and cameras are pointed in our direction, recording our every move. The stranger looks at the kissing couple again, but they are gone.

Instead, I notice a strange commotion, which on closer inspection turns out to be related to my dear friends, Grace and Anya. Anya, Grace's beautiful girlfriend, doesn't skate. Born and raised in India, she never did it as a child and isn't about to start now. Instead, she prefers to twist her body into pretzels, lotuses, and other yoga postures everywhere she goes; the busier the place, the better.

"Yogatta be kidding me," I giggle as I realize what Grace and Anya are doing.

It's yoga porn. This time Anya and Grace are doing a pose together while Kristina is taking photos. Our friend Kristina objects to the term 'yoga porn,' as well as to 'food porn' or 'queer.' She's a Catholic and a good girl, which means such words shouldn't be in her vocabulary.

But just as Kristina takes photos of the food that she prepares for her fiancé and posts them online, Grace and Anya are doing the same thing, only with yoga. While Anya is striking yoga poses, Grace snaps photos and puts them on social media pages.

Whatever you call it, people love it. Being an introvert, I don't like

to attract attention and sometimes feel embarrassed by my friends' lack of inhibitions, but now, I'm delighted to see them. The stranger finally lets go of my hand to sign autographs, so nobody is paying attention to me. He's definitely famous; I examine his face discretely but am still unable to place him. I take out my phone and pretend to check my messages as I snap his picture. Then I wave at my friends with both hands, just as the phone in my hand plays a happy jingle. I know who it is by the sound of the tune.

"Hi, Mom," I answer the call.

"Ola! Where are you?" My mom's voice blasts loudly as I accidentally put her on the speaker. "What's that music I hear? Are you still at the ice rink? Make sure you're wearing a warm jacket and a hat; you don't want to catch a cold for the holidays. And don't forget; we start at seven."

"I'll be there, Mom, I promise," I say. "I'm meeting Grace, Kristina, and Anya to exchange gifts, and then Leo is picking me up. He'll be here any minute now."

"¡Olé! Is that in Spanish?" the stranger asks after I disconnect.

"It's Ola. Short for Aleksandra. That's my name," I explain.

"Nice to meet you, Aleksandra," he says. "Ola," he corrects himself, stressing the last vowel, a bit too much. "I'm Russell. Sorry for bumping into you. And thank you for the dance."

"Well, thank you," I say. "You shouldn't be accosting unsuspecting women like that."

He looks at me. "Even after I save them?"

I can't believe that guy. "I have to go. Nice meeting you, Russell," I say and glide toward my friends, trying not to look back.

As I change into my walking shoes, I can't stop thinking about what just happened. Was that even real, or did I imagine the whole encounter? I do have an overactive imagination, as my mother sometimes tells me. And the fact that he reminds me of someone... I'll have to ask my friends; maybe they'll help me identify the mysterious stranger.

2.

Even if I had any doubts about meeting the stranger, my friends' facial expressions put it to rest. That, plus the pain in my behind, are

proof enough that the encounter really took place.

“Who was the cute guy you were talking to?” Anya asks.

“That was Russell Stone,” Kristina says. “Didn’t you recognize him?”

“Who’s Russell Stone?” My boyfriend’s voice comes from behind.

“Leo! You’re here!” I exclaim. “Hi, honey.” I give him a quick peck on the cheek, wondering if he saw anything. Not that I have anything to hide. After all, it wasn’t my fault that some celebrity kissed me in the middle of the ice rink. It was a completely unprovoked and uninvited kiss.

“You’re kidding, right?” Kristina asks. “He’s all over the Food Network. The big-shot host and chef who saves failing restaurants. Don’t you watch television?”

Leo shakes his head. “Medical residents don’t have time for that,” he points out. When our eyes meet, he shrugs and admits, “Except for the sports channel. But not as much as I used to.”

“I thought he looked familiar,” Grace says.

Russell Stone. Of course! How could I not recognize him? I’m not exactly a fan of the show (or the cooking channel, for that matter), but I bumped into him a few months ago. Literally. He was giving away samples of his food, in front of a restaurant he had just finished renovating. He yelled at me as if it was my fault his tray was blocking my way. Not exactly a nice guy. Obviously, he didn’t recognize me either.

“It looks like the whole crew is here.” Kristina points to a loud group leaving the rink. “The studios are right across the street, in Chelsea.” She turns to me and says, “How about your restaurant? It should be on that show! Their interior decorator is a genius. You’ll get a fabulous makeover plus free publicity.”

“Let me remind you that the restaurant belongs to my father, and I don’t think he’d want to be on television any more than I would,” I say.

Kristina shrugs. “So? Just fill an application for him.”

“Her father doesn’t need it. The restaurant is doing fine, right, Olusia?” Leo says and kisses me on the cheek.

I frown. I’ve asked him countless times not to call me Olusia. Dad used to call me that when I was little, but even he calls me Ola now. “Yeah, I guess. My father doesn’t talk about it much,” I say, which is true, but then again, I don’t ask Dad how the restaurant is doing either.

And I rarely visit the place anymore.

Leo glances at his watch and says, “Come on, Ola, we don't want to be late. I promised your mom we'd get there before the first star.”

I check the time on my phone and realize he's right.

Christmas Eve is a big deal in my family, just like in most families of Polish descent. I wouldn't dare to miss it or even be late. My parents have been planning it since Thanksgiving, and I promised to be there early to help with the last-minute preparations. Plus, I still need to stop at the nearby bookstore to pick up some last-minute gifts.

But before we leave, I have presents for my friends. “Merry Christmas, everybody,” I reach into my bag. “Anya, Kristina, and Grace,” I say as hand them their gifts, a book and a beaded bracelet for each, wrapped in plain newspaper, decorated with shining brocade and colorful stickers. This is not me being a scrooge; it's just an eco-friendly touch, which I know my friends will appreciate.

“Oh! Thank you, Ola. It's lovely,” coos Kristina.

They, too, exchange gifts and then hand me a package that looks like a large book. I unwrap it and read the title. ‘Vegan Richa's Indian Kitchen: Traditional and Creative Recipes for the Home Cook.’ OMG! Thank you guys so much!” I exclaim.

“It was my idea. I hope you don't have it yet,” Anya says.

“No, I don't,” I say. “But I so wanted to get it. You guys are reading my mind!”

“It's not that hard,” Grace says with an eye-roll and good-natured irony in her voice.

She's referring to my obsession with collecting all books vegan. I have an entire library by now, recipe books, and general publications about all aspects of veganism, ethical, and eco-friendly living. Reading a book on an e-reader is convenient, but there is something about holding the physical book in my hand that I love.

Even though I rarely have time to read any of them from cover to cover (I don't cook much and learning about the misery of animals in this world is too depressing most of the time, even for me), it's one of my guilty pleasures. I can't resist the urge to buy a new book that is on the topic as soon as it gets published.

Leo points at his watch, urging me to hurry, so I pick up my stuff quickly. As I turn to wave goodbye, sharp pain in my back makes me cringe, reminding me of the fall.

As we're walking to the car, I glance at Leo and think about the

dance and the kiss. How come we never kiss like that? Is the universe trying to tell me something? Not that I believe in the supernatural stuff, but, as anyone who watches Christmas-themed romances knows, this is the perfect time for miracles.

“Let me help you with this,” Leo offers, taking the bag with the skates from me. His voice brings me back to reality.

“Did you bring everything?” I ask. “The food, the gifts, your bags, your passport?”

Right after the Christmas Eve supper, Leo and Aunt Elvira are going on a trip to Poland, where Leo will participate in a medical symposium, while Aunt Elvira will be visiting her relatives. She feels she’s getting old and wants to visit her homeland for the very last time.

“I think so,” he says. “Except for borsch. I couldn’t find it anywhere.”

“That’s fine,” I say absentmindedly.

He stops and takes my hand. “I wish I didn’t have to go. Are you sure you’ll be okay?” he asks.

“It’s not like you’re leaving me for good, are you?” I say, jokingly.

“No, of course not. It’s just two weeks. I just feel bad because I won’t be here for the New Year’s celebration. I promise I’ll make it up to you as soon as I’m back.”

“I intend to have fun with the girls. And I’m sure you’ll have fun, too.” I give him a peck on a cheek.

“Don’t forget, I’m going there to work. Plus, meeting all that family, driving Aunt Elvira around Poland in the middle of winter, should be interesting,” he chuckles.

I can tell Leo isn’t excited about the trip. He’d rather stay here with me for the rest of Christmas, so we greet the New Year together. I take his hand and pull him toward the car. There is no time for chit-chat. We must hurry if we don’t want to be late for sharing the Christmas wafer. The tradition is sacred to my family, and my mom would consider it a huge disrespect if we missed it.

I would probably never hear the end of it.

3.

Leo parks in front of the bookstore, the biggest in the city, filled with shoppers on a buying frenzy. “Are you sure we have time for

this?" asks Leo.

"I'll be super quick," I assure him and dash into the store.

"Happy holidays!" A perky assistant jumps out from behind a pile of books as I enter the store. "Be sure to visit the sections with special deals. And let me know if you need anything," She gives me an ear to ear smile, which doesn't seem that sincere. It's more like a grimace. She's probably done it a thousand times today.

"Thank you," I say, not intending to take her up on the offer. I prefer to shop alone, plus her cheerful attitude is a bit much for me at the moment. I love books, and visiting bookstores and libraries is one of my favorite activities. Whenever I'm in a new city, a neighborhood, or even just a shopping mall, I judge them by the quality of the bookstores. While searching online is quick and efficient, browsing the shelves is much more exciting, like a treasure hunt, you never know what you'll find.

But today I have no time for that. I have a job to do and must do it quickly.

The health and nutrition section resides in a prominent part of the store. As I look around, my jaw drops. It's bigger than the reference, travel, and history sections combined. I didn't expect to see so many books on the topic. Now I regret my decision to turn down help.

I don't know why I hoped coming here will be easier than shopping online. The search for 'books on healthy eating' and 'diabetes diet' returned thousands of results, but even here, there must be hundreds of books on those shelves. I sigh.

Not ready to throw in the towel, I read through some of the titles. Almost all have a 'radical,' 'ground-breaking,' or 'miracle' in the title or some combination of the three. It's like each author has come across some unknown secret or a deeply hidden truth, which they decided to share with the world.

And what's interesting is that many of those truths are in total contradiction to each other. No wonder people are confused! If all of those writers, whose works stand next to each other on the same shelf, claim to have found the truth, how does one even begin to unravel what the truth is?

And whose truth is the real truth?

I glance at my watch and panic. Leo is probably getting restless by now. He hates being late.

I decide to find a sales associate. The woman who greeted me

earlier is in the Fitness and Exercise isle, arranging a collection of books on a new—and ground-breaking!—exercise regimen that promises to get you a miracle body in a flash. Looking at the covers featuring hard bodies in tight outfits, I feel a pang of remorse for skipping the gym that week. I had more important things to do, of course. But don't I always? Maybe I should get that book? It looks like it could help me with the problem of exercise, without the need to go to the gym, like, ever. I chuckle under my breath and again have to remind myself why I'm there.

Focus, Aleksandra, focus!

"Excuse me. Could you please help me find these?" I hand the assistant my long list of titles, all of which are highly recommended by sources I trust.

"Sure. We should have most of them in stock, and if we don't, we can order them for you, no problem." One by one, she checks her computer and fetches the books I requested, the pile on her desk growing taller. "We don't have this one right now, but I can place an order for you, and you could pick it up in a couple of days."

I shake my head. "No, thank you. I think I have enough."

She looks at me from behind her eyeglasses. "Someone close to you has diabetes?"

"My father."

"This one is my favorite." She says, pointing to the book titled: "The End of Diabetes" by Dr. Joel Fuhrman. "This doctor helped my mom get healthy. And he's in New Jersey, so your father can go see him."

If only he'd listen, I think. "Yes, I know him. But he's so stubborn. I mean, my dad, not Dr. Fuhrman. He keeps telling me he's fine," I say.

"I know what you mean." She nods. "Okay, let me help you carry these to the register. Anything else I can do for you today?"

"No, thank you," I smile back.

She touches my arm. "My name is Angela. If you or your dad ever want to talk to my mom, she's happy to share her experience with anyone who'll listen," she says. I nod, distractedly, as I notice Leo waving at me and pointing at his watch. Angela scribbles a note and hands it to me. "You know where to find me."

"Will that be cash or credit?" the cashier asks.

"Credit," I reply automatically.

“Do you need a plastic bag for these?”

“No, thank you, I have my own.” I’m glad I brought two additional bags; I purchased a lot more books than I expected, including, “Thug Kitchen,” and “Eat like you care,” by Gary Francione (for my brother), the “Inconvenient truth” (for Mom), “The Ultimate Betrayal: Is There Happy Meat?” by Hope Bohanec (for my sister, who won’t be there tonight, but I’ll give it to her whenever she comes back home), and a tome by a John Stone on vegan activism that I heard so much about (just for me). I also grab “Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust,” which I’ve heard so much about (the title sounds shocking and intriguing at the same time), and the latest book by Robert Heart, another favorite author of mine.

My arm stretches low as I carry everything to the car. I didn’t expect all that to be so heavy.

“What took you so long?” Leo scoffs as he takes the bags from me. “Whoa! Did you buy the whole store or just the section on vegan nutrition?”

“No, but I got everything that I wanted,” I reply.

“You know there’s this thing called e-readers,” he snorts and peeks inside at some of the titles.

“It’s for my dad,” I explain.

I brace myself for his comment. He’ll probably tell me that I should stay out of this; leave it to the doctors. After all, I’m not a physician, he is. We’ve had this conversation a hundred times at least, and it usually ended in a fight.

But he just sighs with resignation. “And you think reading this will cure him?”

“I don’t know. It might.” I sigh.

Buying the books is the easy part, but getting my dad to read any of them is a whole other story. Judging by the sheer volume of the publications, there is no way he’ll ever do that. At the very least, I’ll educate myself, and then pass the knowledge to my father, feeding him information in small chunks.

“Baby steps,” I say. “These always work.”

And that’s exactly what I intend to do.

4.

Christmas Eve (in Polish: Wigilia), the twenty-fourth day of December, is the most celebrated day of the entire year in Polish homes. The most important event of this day is a solemn supper that, according to tradition, should begin when the first star appears in the sky. Before the meal, Polish families pray together and share *oplatek*, a special blessed Christmas wafer, wishing each other all the best. No meat is served on Wigilia, and the supper itself consists of twelve dishes—representing the twelve apostles—including specialties of Polish cuisine, such as carp and red borscht. There is always one extra setting at the table for an unexpected guest, symbolizing the anticipation of the coming of Jesus Christ.

According to Liliana Kwasniewska, my mother, nothing says “I love you” like the sharing of an *oplatek*, a thin, rectangular wafer about the size of a hand, embossed with a Christmas Nativity scene. Taste-wise, it’s nothing to rave about. Plain and flavorless, made of flour and water pressed between two engraved pieces of metal, similar to the bread wafer used in Holy Communion. Sharing the wafer is a ceremony that comes at the very beginning of the meal.

But even if wafer itself is dry and tasteless, it is the thought that counts. Every year our family sends it all the way from Poland, and it is the sentiment that matters, not the flavor. Before sitting down to Christmas Eve dinner, families of Polish origin all across the globe take part in this tradition, which has roots dating back hundreds of years and many generations.

When my grandfather was still alive, he always reminded me that sharing of this unleavened bread with another person is sharing all that is good with my life. It is a time to tell each other, ‘I love you, I care about you.’ And it continues down through the generations because it is such a beautiful tradition.

For Polish Americans, sharing that plain wafer is the essence of Christmas Eve. It defined their heritage, their identity. Wafer, and, of course, the food. Beet borsch, cabbage with mushrooms, poppy seed cake, pierogi, and—carp.

In Poland, Christmas Eve is a day of fasting, and then feasting. You’re not supposed to eat much during the day, and then you sit

down to the supper, which can last for hours. The feast begins at the appearance of the first star. Which means both Leo and I are starving when we get to my parent's home.

It is dark out, and the sky is overcast with heavy clouds, so there is no way to tell how many stars are in the sky. We are the last ones to arrive, the living room bustling with conversations. Leo helps me with my coat, which he hangs in the big closet by the entry door before going into the living room to greet everybody. My mom's favorite carol, the Silent Night, is playing in the background.

"Hi, Mom! Merry Christmas! What's that sound?" I say, kissing her on both cheeks.

"Why, that's Silent Night, of course. Uncle Janusz brought us some holiday music. It is so nice of him. I'm so tired of listening to the same recordings every year. Do you like it?" Mom asks.

"No, not that. That!"

Loud thumping and pounding sounds are coming from behind the closed door, interspersed with muffled curses that don't quite suit the holy occasion.

I recognize the cursing voice to be my dad's.

"Tch!" Mom waves the kitchen towel at me in a gesture that expresses both helplessness and aggravation. "You know your father."

I give her a pleading look. "No! Not again!"

"Oh, yes! And what did you expect? Some things never change." My brother, Peter, sneaks on me from behind and squeezes me in a forceful hug. "Merry Christmas, Ola!"

"Ouch! Stop it!" I swirl around to face him. "Hi, Peter. Let me guess; Dad is killing carp."

"It turned into a bloody battle. The poor fish is fighting for its life." My brother confirms my suspicion.

The noise stops abruptly, and the door to the kitchen flings open.

Our father, Henry Kwasniewski, stands in the middle of what resembles a homicide scene from the NYPD investigation.

"Oh my god! Look at this! It's like bloody murder in there! This place is a total mess. Who's going to clean it up?" Mom raises her hands in despair.

"Who'd think a creature like that would have so much strength!" Dad rinses his hands in the sink where dismembered body parts of the fish swim in the water.

Mom gasps and puts her hands on her hips. "Look at all this blood!"

We just had them painted after last year's disaster!"

"Don't worry, Lisiu. I chose a paint that can be washed with soap and water. I'll take care of that. There will be no sign of blood, I promise," Dad says with a disarming smile. He notices me, "Ola, you're here." He opens his arms wide to give me a hug.

I hesitate. With apron splattered with blood and a butcher's knife clenched in his hand, my father looks like a murderer.

"Merry Christmas, Dad. How are you?" I kiss him on the cheek, careful not to get blood on my clothes. "Why do you have to keep doing that?" I ask. "I really wish you'd stop."

He huffs with indignation. "What do you mean—stop? It's a tradition! That's what my father did, your grandfather, and many generations before him." He winks at me, and I notice his eyes are puffy and tired. Is that stress? He is not the one to confide in his family, but I know my father; I can tell something isn't right.

"Really? And that's a good enough reason for you?" I say. "Besides, if it's a tradition that is stupid and cruel, why can't you come up with a new one?"

"Then it wouldn't be a tradition. And what would be the point?"

Mom steps into the kitchen, armed with a brush, a bucket, and a handful of rags. "Here, that's for you, Henry. I'm not cleaning your mess this year." She rolls her eyes at me. "You know your father. He always wants to have the freshest of ingredients."

Dad nods. "That's the name of the game—it's all about the ingredients."

I practically lip-synch the last sentence with him; that's how well I know the spiel.

"Go ahead, Ola, don't just stand there like a statue. Help your mother, or we won't be ready before midnight."

I take a look around. The kitchen walls are covered in blood, there's a dead animal in the sink, and my father is holding a bloody knife—all that happening to the tune of Silent Night, a gentle lullaby that's playing in the background.

Am I the only one noticing the absurdity of the situation?

"Is that how we should celebrate this holiday? The birth of Jesus Christ, the savior? With a bloody murder?" I say.

"What's going on here?" Grandma Barbara enters the kitchen, making a sign of the cross in the air. "Do not call on your God's name in vain, Aleksandra."

“Listen to Grandma,” Dad says. “Damned fish. I’ve never had so much trouble killing carp before.”

“You say that every year,” Mom reminds him.

“Can you blame him? He’s fighting for his life,” I say.

“That poor thing!” Mom sighs. “You sure have to admire its will to live.”

“A fish is not a thing,” I say.

As a vegan, I don’t believe fishes or any other animals should suffer such violent death, just to end up as a centerpiece on the table, no matter what the occasion. However, my attempts to change the bloody tradition in my family to something more gentle and kind have been downright ineffective. “It’s a *living being*,” I add, emphasizing the last two words.

“A tasty being!” Peter interjects, smacking his lips. “Come on, sister. Lighten up. It’s Christmas, for Christ’s sake.”

“Do not call on your God’s name in vain, Peter,” I say. “Explain to me again: how is killing compatible with the spirit of Christmas? Doesn’t the Bible say ‘Thou shall not kill’?”

“That doesn’t apply to fish. It only applies to humans,” Grandma Barbara points out.

“And why is that?” I ask provocatively.

“Fish don’t have souls,” she replies as if that explains everything.

It may be the most obvious of answers to a Christian, but as a vegan, it doesn’t satisfy me. “Don’t you ever wonder what fish would say if they really could talk at midnight?” I ask.

One of the many beliefs associated with Christmas Eve is that at midnight, animals speak with a human voice.

“The carp would say nothing. He’s already dead, remember,” Peter chuckles.

This is so frustrating. It is supposed to be a great family gathering, but suddenly I can’t wait for it to be over.

“She’s still upset about Franek. Aren’t you, Ola? You need to get over him,” he says.

I frown and grab a broom, pretending I’m about to hit him with the stick. He makes a swift ducking move and almost knocks down the stack of dishes on the side table.

“Stop it, kids!” Mom reprimands us just like in the old days, waving her kitchen napkin at us. “You’ll break my Christmas tableware.”

Franek wasn't the first carp that my father killed, but the one I still remember to this day. When I was little, Dad brought him home a couple of days before Christmas and announced that we'd keep him in our bathtub. I became friends with the fish and gave him a name, Franek. I was so thrilled to have a pet!

What I didn't realize (and my parents never told me), the arrangement was only temporary and would last till the day before Christmas.

And as magically as the beautifully decorated Christmas tree appeared in our living room, Franek's life not-so-magically ended. Just as the fish my father killed today, Franek put up a big fight. I could hear the sounds coming out of the kitchen and wondered what was going on in there. Mom was guarding the door, so I went to the bathroom to check if Franek wasn't bothered by the noise.

Shockingly, Franek wasn't there. Surely, he had no way to escape. It's not like he could just walk out of there.

When I finally found out what had happened, I was devastated and didn't speak to my parents for a month. Needless to say, I hadn't even touched the fish, which Dad prepared in three different ways: fried, baked, and jellied.

Later I learned more about this so-called 'tradition' of keeping carp in a bathtub before Christmas Eve. It wasn't as ancient as my parents would like me to believe. It started sometime after the Second World War and was something that took place in Poland and other neighboring nations.

The fish could live in the bathtub for days. Kids would name them and play with them. People couldn't bathe. Then, the father would take the poor creature out of the water and slice its head off with a knife. If he wanted to do it more compassionately, he would first knock the fish unconscious with a hammer.

It could be more complicated than it sounds. Carp are slippery and, sensing the end, fight for their lives with all their might, something my father witnessed again and again.

After several of these battles, my family ended up having to repaint the kitchen after Christmas, and I heard stories of people setting the fish free, unable to go through with their plan to transform it into dinner.

“Humans have been eating animals since time immemorial, and

they'll continue to do that, so get over it. You can't do anything about it. And you sure as hell can't change the world," Peter says. I shrug and roll my eyes at him. He may be my dear little brother, and he may be right, but sometimes he's also annoying as hell.

I try to prepare a vegan dish for each family gathering, even though cooking has never been my thing (and some say that I'm terrible at it).

Truth be told, I still don't know what my thing even is. Despite having a successful career and landing my dream job at one of the biggest advertising agencies in town, I still feel like something is missing. Dad wanted me to be a doctor, like my older sister, but I can't stand the sight of blood and wounds, and visiting hospitals makes me feel depressed. Dad often said that he'd love to leave the restaurant to Peter or me, but sadly, I didn't inherit Dad's talent for cooking. The sight of the blood of carp or raw meat has always made me nauseous. And since I became vegan, things got even more complicated in that department.

Let's just say I am no kitchen queen by any stretch of the imagination.

At least, the menu on Christmas Eve is mostly meatless and made of simple ingredients. Not vegan, because of the dairy, and not vegetarian, because of the carp and the occasional herring, but as close as it gets. Traditionally, Christmas Eve marks the end of Advent, which means the last day of fasting. Typical dishes on the table might be beet or mushroom soup, boiled potatoes, fried carp, and stewed fruits.

Plus, of course, pierogi.

No Polish feast is complete without those cute little dumplings. And that's what I decided to tackle this year, an ambitious (and rather daring) undertaking. I spent hours mixing the dough, rolling it out, trying to piece together my pierogi; swearing and cursing in the process, then apologizing and talking nicely to them, as if that could make a difference.

I told them they were adorable and so delicious, and please, oh please, would they just not fall apart on me in the water.

But sure enough, they started to fall apart as soon as I dropped them into the boiling liquid, ungrateful little buggers.

I look at the plate with disgust. The filling turned into mush, and my pierogi look like pathetic lumps of pulp, not the pretty little dumplings my dad or Aunt Elizabeth so effortlessly make.

It's the thought that counts, right? I remind myself, gloomily, as I examine them. Honestly, if it weren't for the desire to show my family that vegan cooking is something anyone could do, I'd have given up long ago.

"Um, what are these?" Peter asks, probing the gooey mess with his fork.

"Looks like potato pierogi," Grandma Barbara offers a tentative guess.

"Ola made them," Leo says as if that explains everything.

"Oh?" Uncle Janusz gets curious, bending over the plate to inspect its contents. "They seem..." He furrows his bushy eyebrows, searching for the word. "Unconventional." He finds it.

"It doesn't matter how they look. It's the taste that counts, right? And I'm sure they're delicious." Dad takes a fork and slides a few lumps onto his plate. I smile at him, grateful for the comment. It's sweet of him to say that. Since I can remember, I've been striving to please my father but never quite succeeding. Still, he tries to encourage me and praise me for my efforts every time.

"Those are not bad, actually. I had one, and it was quite tasty," Leo says.

My brother is more direct. "They may be tasty, but they look nasty," he sneers. "I told you that's not a job for you. You should leave it to Aunt Elizabeth or Dad to make them."

As much as it hurts, I know he's right. I sigh and glance at the big clock over the kitchen counter as everybody sits down at the table. I remind myself that the red beet borscht I made from freshly squeezed beet juice turned out great. Sadly, I spilled it on the pavement as I was taking it to the car this morning, leaving a stain that looked like a pool of blood, so nobody will be complimenting me on that.

After supper, we unwrap our gifts and sing Christmas carols, uncle Janusz being the loudest and most out of tune. (Gifts are exchanged on Christmas Eve in Poland, and we follow the tradition of my parent's homeland.)

For my mom, in addition to the book, I purchased a set of linen and cotton handkerchiefs, table napkins, and shopping bags. Hand made and adorable; they're also practical and eco-friendly. I hope Mom will

use them, but she can be hard to please when it comes to gifts. (She often says she doesn't need anything, and we shouldn't waste our hard-earned money on her.)

Dad doesn't comment on the pile of books I bought for him. He passes them to Mom, who puts them on the shelf in the guest bedroom, where the last year's volumes are standing next to the ones from the years before. My parents have amassed quite a library on the topic of health and nutrition, thanks to me. I wonder if they ever read any of it.

Probably not, but I really wish they would.

Meanwhile, Dad is going on and on about the new set of knives that Peter brought for him from Japan. Long, sharp, and shiny, they resemble miniature samurai swords.

Fortunately, at that point, Leo and Aunt Elvira start saying their goodbyes and getting ready to leave. I get up too as I have promised to drive them to the airport.

"Are you ready to go, Aunt Elvira?" I ask. "Leo will take your bags to the car."

"Who's Leo?" Aunt Elvira asks loudly, adjusting her hearing aid.

"It's short for Leszek," I explain.

"No, it's not," Peter interjects. "Leszek is Leszek. Or Les, maybe. But not Leo."

I glare at him, hoping he'll shut up, but he ignores me.

My boyfriend's name is Leszek Szczerski, but few Americans can pronounce it, so a while ago Leszek declared that he wanted to be called Leo. I think the new nickname fits him well; he does look a bit like Leonardo di Caprio, minus the acting talent and the hefty bank account, of course.

"Why do you have to go today?" Dad asks.

"The flights are so much cheaper, and planes are not overcrowded. Nobody is flying on Christmas Eve," says Aunt Elvira. "That way, we get to spend Christmas Eve with you and Christmas Day with the family in Poland."

"Good thinking." Dad nods. "We'll wait for you, Ola, to go to Pasterka," he says, but I interrupt him.

"Please don't. I don't know when I'll be back. I may go straight home," I say.

"You're not going to skip Pasterka because of us?" Aunt Elvira asks in horror. "Because if you are, we should just take a taxi."

I shake my head. "Don't worry, Grandma," I say.

Pasterka is a midnight mass celebrated by Roman Catholics between the 24th and 25th of December. A close translation of the name would be the shepherds' mass, referring to the Biblical shepherds, who were visited by an angel and told of the birth of Christ.

I'm not religious (I stopped going to church when I was still in high school), but Pasterka is an integral part of the Christmas celebration and a beautiful tradition. It also provides a welcome break from all the eating and drinking. Just before midnight, after being seated at the table and gulping down food for a few hours, everyone bundles up warmly and walks to the nearby church to sing traditional Christmas carols in the spirit of joy. Cold air and exercise are refreshing and invigorating, and just what the doctor ordered.

"I'll join you in church," I say to Dad.

"Have a great time in Poland, you two!" Dad waves to Leo and Aunt Elvira as I close the door behind us.

5.

I drop off Leo and Aunt Elvira at the departures entrance of the Newark International Airport. As they disappear behind the automatic doors, I wave to them for the last time, but the two travellers don't look back.

I feel a pang of sadness that Leo is leaving for the holidays but also a relief. I need a break and have been looking forward to a few days just to myself. Since my job doesn't allow me to go on vacation right now, this is the next best thing.

But what does that mean? Shouldn't I feel sorry that my boyfriend is leaving? Is it normal or should I worry about my relationship?

A loud horn from behind wakes me up from my thoughts. "All right, I'm going! What's the hurry?" I press on the gas pedal as the light changes to green.

The prospect of going to church now doesn't seem appealing. I feel tired and decide to drive home. The roads are empty at this late hour. I turn on the radio, and my favorite song is on, which reminds me of the strange encounter with the famous chef. I shouldn't be thinking of him now, I tell myself. I am dating a great guy; we practically grew up together and my family adores him, which makes him the obvious candidate for a stable lifetime relationship.

Still, I can't help myself. As soon as I get back home, I google Russell Stone on my computer. A long list of results pops up, including an article in a trashy gossip publication, highlighting his recent breakup with the assistant producer of the eXtreme Restaurant Makeover show, Marla Quinn. The photo of the ex takes a while to load, but once it does, it confirms my suspicion—she's the woman I saw at the rink making out with the second cameraman or the third, or who knows which. The article ends with a statement: "Evidently, Russell Stone hasn't gotten over his breakup with Marla Quinn, who accused him of stalking her on multiple occasions."

So that was it. That kiss was supposed to make his ex jealous, that's all. I shouldn't take it personally—I don't even know the guy, for heaven's sake. Plus, he clearly is a stalker who preys on unsuspecting women. Still, I feel a pang of regret in my gut, as if I've been rejected.

I must forget the whole thing ever happened. After all, I have plenty of things to worry about. Like the fact that I'm going through a rough patch at work. When I got the job, I was so happy. I believed that this was an opportunity of a lifetime. But long hours and cut-throat competitiveness of some of my co-workers, who wouldn't hesitate to stab me in the back if their promotion depended on it, make me feel exhausted and disillusioned. Lately, it has gotten so bad, I seriously considered quitting.

On top of my troubles at work, at the age of twenty-five, after years of dating Leo, we're still not engaged. Which, if I'm honest, doesn't bother me as much as it upsets my mom.

She should worry about Dad's health, not my marital status.

I really wish they'd both take better care of themselves, but they just won't listen to my advice about health, never read the books I buy for them, and criticize my food choices—especially my being vegan—as if it's just a whim, a childish caprice, or some silly fad diet, not a matter of health, ethics, and social justice.

I am a grown woman, yet nobody takes my opinions seriously.

No matter what I tell them, it all means nothing to them. I don't understand why everybody in my family treats me like I'm a child.

6.

I need to vent my frustration, so instead of going to bed, I start banging on the keyboard, angry thoughts passing through my mind faster than I can type.

“Definition of Tradition (according to UrbanDictionary.com):
'The reason for doing things which have no apparent reason.'”

Son: “Dad, why are you peeing on the cat.”

Dad: “Because it is Tradition God Damn it. Every July 23rd, we pee on a cat. My father peed on a cat, his father peed on a cat, and you're also gonna pee on the cat.”

The Easter European version could be:

Daughter (sobbing): “Dad, why are you pounding Franek (the carp that's been living in our bathtub for a week and has become my dear friend) on the head with a hammer.”

Dad: “Because it is Tradition God Damn it. Every December 24th, we pound a carp on the head with a hammer to kill it and eat it for Christmas Eve supper. My father has pounded a carp with a hammer, his father has pounded a carp with a hammer, and you're also gonna pound a carp with a hammer and then slit his throat open with a knife to kill it for the Christmas Eve supper.”

So there.

Traditions don't always make sense, but we don't question traditions.

Traditions need to be respected, not examined, or changed.

They certainly don't need to be improved, because they link us to the past.

Right?

Not!

Things change.

In fact, everything changes.

As human consciousness and society constantly evolve, the existing customs and traditions must evolve as well.

Or, to put it bluntly: Traditions that are totally messed up must change or die!”

I pause, staring at the blinking cursor, musing on the right choice of words.

“Messed up?”

Shouldn't I use something stronger?

I don't swear, certainly not in public, but sometimes it's the only way to call attention to something so wrong, so ... fucked up.

Maybe I should rethink the self-imposed language guidelines and call things what they really are.

After a moment of consideration, I decide against it. I don't like receiving angry comments, and using foul language will not only provoke people but make them feel justified in their anger.

I continue: "There are plenty of traditions that we can do without. They came from the past, a distinct point in time, where certain conditions existed, perhaps requiring things to be done in a certain way—but these conditions usually don't exist anymore. And often, it was because of ignorance and lack of knowledge of how things work, not a real need."

Hmmm. I need some examples. What are the things that humans used to do that we don't condone any more? Let me think...

There are plenty of things that need to change, plenty of so-called traditions that we could do without. Humans eating humans. Human sacrifice. (At least we've gotten rid of these.) Humans using other humans as slaves? (Slavery is forbidden by law in most countries, but it doesn't mean that modern-day slaves don't exist.) Humans settling their differences of opinions by killing other humans in wars over territory and power? (Unfortunately, it still goes on.)

But how about these—

Bullfighting. Dogfighting. Animal sacrifice. Forcing wild animals to perform labor or tricks for human entertainment. Throwing goats (and infants) from towers (a tradition that exists in some parts of India to this day, I mean, how sick is that?) Throwing turkeys from airplanes (I swear that's actually a thing in some parts of the U.S.). Humans eating non-human animals. (Which is considered 'normal' by most of the human population.)

The world keeps changing; our understanding of things keeps evolving. We take pride in our accomplishments—scientific, technical, economic, and cultural. And while we must remember our past, there are plenty of traditions that are outdated, destructive, disgusting, or plain evil.

All these so-called "traditions" need to EVOLVE, meaning, get their act together or go extinct already, and only become a thing of the past!

Let's take, for example, the custom of buying a live carp for

Christmas, keeping it in your bathtub days, before killing it with your own hands, preparing and eating on Christmas Eve supper.

(An alternative is to buy from a street vendor who keeps the fish in a tank, or, as most people do these days, just get a fish that's dead already from the store, saving themselves the gory fight.)”

I decide to take a break from my rant and do some research.

I go into the kitchen, pour myself hot tea, and return to my laptop.

“Celebrating life and peace with a hammer and a knife?

It's time to evolve, people!

It's time for evolution—to get to the next stage of human consciousness and spirit.

Today, we don't need to resort to cruel practices to make sure our food is fresh—we have refrigerators.

But what's even more critical, we don't have to resort to violence and killing, period.

Today, we don't just need a carp for Christmas.

We also don't need a turkey for Thanksgiving, eggs for Easter, or beef for dinner.

(Just as we don't need so-called ‘traditional’ specialties, be that the tripe soup, pork chops, ribs, and hunter's stew.)

There is plenty of non-violent food available that will satisfy our appetites and maintain our good health.

Our culinary traditions need to evolve to keep up with human consciousness that makes the adoption of a compassionate and just way of living and eating inevitable.

To put it bluntly once again:

Traditions that are F*CKED UP MUST EVOLVE OR DIE!

So, yeah ...

Oh, and Merry Christmas to all of you who celebrate this wonderful time of the year!

Aleksandra”

Then I type the P.S.

“What weird traditions are a part of your culture? What are your most cherished traditions that are messed up and in need of evolution? And what do you do about them? Do you suck it up and keep your feelings inside of you, not wanting to offend people, to avoid being different, being labeled an weirdo or an extremist.”

I pause and scratch my head.

Am I an extremist?

Maybe. Probably.

In the opinion of the majority, I most likely am.

Before I reread the article, I click a button to save it, only to realize it was the post button. The article goes live instantly, and I panic. I should check for typos and punctuation, and whatnot; make it perfect.

Then I shrug.

What difference does it make? Does anyone even read the stuff I write?

I check the counter: three visitors since yesterday.

Hardly earth-shattering. At that rate, I won't be starting a revolution any time soon.

Maybe I should stick to topics such as health and smoothies. Those are getting much more traction with the readers, unlike my passionate rants about veganism, for which I receive mostly silent treatment, plus some scornful comments.

People simply don't care about this stuff. And—as my mom always tells me—one person cannot change the world.

7.

As soon as my post appears on my blog, I receive a comment.

Whoa, that was fast!

I hope that isn't one of the automatic spammers or anti-vegan crusaders. Cautiously, I read the message:

“Thank you for your post. I wanted to share with you my prayer for humans on behalf of the animals. It helps me stay grounded and focused on what's important amidst all the realities of the modern world. I think you could use it too. I hope that we can all navigate through this world with the grace and integrity of those who most need our protection, both humans and non-humans.

PRAYER ON BEHALF OF THE ANIMALS

'May we have the sense of humor and liveliness of the goats, the maternal instincts and protective nature of the hens and the sassiness of the roosters. May we have the gentleness and strength of the cattle, the wisdom, serenity, and humility of the donkeys.... May it be so.”

“Amen,” I say, as I finish, feeling tears coming to my eyes.

I know that prayer. It's by one of my favorite authors and podcasters, Colleen Patrick Goudreau.

“Thank you for these beautiful words,” I type a reply.

Then I think—what about the fish?

There is nothing about fish in the prayer.

We don't think about fish having feelings.

Is it because they are so alien to us?

Fish or I should say, fishes, rarely find themselves on the receiving end of our compassion. They are far more likely to find themselves on the end of the fishing line, their body thorn by the sharp hook, pulled from their element, into the atmosphere that's deadly for them.

They don't scream in pain or shout in anger.

Don't plead or beg for mercy.

Fishes tell us nothing.

Even on Christmas Eve, when animals are supposed to speak in human voices.

As the 'Silent Night' carol tunes out, the prayers and wishes for peace and love come from everywhere, carp in the tub conjures no pity, no love, no compassion.

I google “Silent Night” on my phone. Written by Joseph Mohr and Franc Gruber, it is one of the most ubiquitous Christmas carols, translated into at least 140 human languages, according to Wikipedia.

It has not been translated into any non-human languages to date, as far as I know.

From another article, I learn that “Silent Night” is believed to have some genuinely magical powers, calming and bringing peace to the human soul.

On more than one occasion in both World Wars, fighting at Christmas was brought to a temporary close by troops singing their native versions of “Silent Night” to one another across the front line.

Alas, it brings no peace for non-human species.

Alas, it doesn't stop the killing in the kitchens and slaughterhouses.

Carp faces silent death to the tune of the “Silent Night.”

I wonder what carps would tell us if they could talk.

'Carp' and 'talk' seems like an oxymoron, because, of course, no fish can speak a human language.

Plus, of course, no one can talk when underwater. But that doesn't mean sea animals don't communicate with each other; it's just their communication is voice-less, one that we cannot hear or comprehend.

Is fish even an animal?

Some question that. On multiple occasions, I've been offered fish (or, even more quizzically, chicken) when I tell people that I'm vegan and ask about vegan or vegetarian options on the menu. "Surely you can eat that!" the server says with a smile. Did she sleep through the biology class about the difference in plant and animal kingdom?

So fish—just as all other animals—stay silent, even on Christmas Eve.

And maybe it's for the best.

The things a carp would tell us might hurt our feelings and damage our self-image as a kind and compassionate species. Which we occasionally are, when it suits us.

But not toward carp.

Like so many other species, carp don't have the good fortune to experience our benevolence.

I close my laptop and rub my eyes. It's almost two in the morning, and I need to get some sleep.

The Christmas Day dinner will not be any easier. Family meals can be tough, especially those big celebrations.

I resent my parents treating me like I'm a child; their little girl who needs to be told what to do and how to live. Okay, so maybe I've given them a few reasons, such as changing jobs every two years, and my on and off relationship with Leo (we broke up and then reunited a couple of times and still aren't quite 'settled-in').

But also—my parents refuse to accept the fact that not everybody wants to settle, with a mortgage and a husband, popping babies before the age of thirty. Things have changed from the time when my parents were young, but they don't seem to notice or accept that. And they don't want to listen to what I tell them—that they should take better care of themselves, change their diet, exercise more; as if the advice and wisdom should only go one way, from the elderly to the young, never in the opposite direction.

I close my laptop and turn off the lights. Few people know or read my blog, but it doesn't matter. Writing it feels therapeutic. Each time I publish a post, it's like a heavy load is lifted off my chest. Feeling content, I finally drift off to sleep.

8.

The Christmas Day dinner on the next day is another big celebration at my parents' home, who live in one of the brick buildings that line the streets of Green Point. I arrive early to help prepare the feast. Dad is in the living room, chatting merrily with the family and friends who arrived first and are now waiting patiently for more delicious food.

Mom doesn't like people in the kitchen when she cooks, so we enjoy some quiet time together, just the two of us. Peeling potatoes and dressing a salad with my mother reminds me of my childhood. I used to help a lot preparing the meals when I was little, enjoying being my mom and dad's little helper.

"What should I make for your father's birthday next week?" she asks me. "I don't even know what to feed you anymore. Why do you make things so complicated?"

I drop a peeled potato in the pot filled with water and pick up the next one. "Preparing delicious food that's also healthy and vegan is not complicated. Quite the opposite, in fact," I say. "Use plants, minimally processed, that's all. It's easy. And totally worth the effort. Have you even read any of the books I gave you?" I ask, even though I know she hasn't. Why does she have to bring it up now? We've had this conversation before, and it never ends well. She gets upset that I'm being difficult, and I get angry that she doesn't understand.

Mom shrugs. "I don't have time for reading. Wait till you have a family, you'll see. In the real world, people don't want to make sacrifices just to spare a few pigs and chickens."

I don't say anything, not wanting to get into an argument.

Mom grabs a big spatula and stirs the soup, simmering in a big pot on the stove. The aroma of boletus mushrooms fills the room. Umm! It smells delicious. I love mushroom soup that my mom makes.

She opens the fridge and reaches for a container with dairy cream.

"Are you going to add that?" I ask. "Because if you are, please save some soup for me. Some other guests may also like it without dairy."

Mom shakes her head with what I can only interpret as disapproval, "You won't eat turkey, or chicken, or even fish. Meals used to be so simple. Now I feel like a line cook in a restaurant kitchen: everybody wants something different. He won't eat this; she

won't eat that. One eats like a caveman, another like a rabbit or a chimpanzee. Dad must avoid salt and sugar. Your cousin Patricia is gluten-free. And you won't eat any meat or dairy. I don't understand why you're doing it. At least they have good reasons for their choices.”

“Oh, so my reasons are bad.”

“I'm not saying they're bad. It's your personal choice that you're trying to force on others.”

I bite my lips but say nothing. We've had that conversation before, and my mom knows exactly where I stand on that.

“It's not like you'll drop dead from eating a piece of meat. On the other hand, allergy to nuts and shellfish can be deadly,” she adds.

“Eating chicken meat is deadly to chickens. Eating bacon and pork chops is deadly to pigs,” I say, trying to control my frustration.

“Why do you have to bring pigs and chickens into every conversation? You're so concerned about them when there are so many serious problems in the world. People dying from hunger. Terrorist attacks. Sick children. Don't you care about sick children?”

“Why do you have to bring up sick children every time we talk about food?” I retort. “And if children are getting sick all the time, why do you want me to have them? It doesn't make any sense.”

“I don't know what got into you, Ola. I don't recognize you anymore. We can't even have a normal conversation or a peaceful meal together.”

A peaceful meal?

I look at the dish next to the frying pan. A stack of big pork chops, each the size of a Frisbee and covered in egg and bread crumbs, are ready to be fried. Only I don't see food, I see violence, and the animal behind it.

“It's like you care about some pigs and chickens more than you care about my grandchildren.”

I do a double-take. “Mom, you don't have any grandchildren.”

“That's exactly my point—your father and I would like to meet our grandkids before we go.”

“And you're going where?”

I can't believe she's trying to pity-talk me into having children.

Mom gives up on me. She gets up and starts wiping the table.

“Oh, so it's all my fault,” I say. “I'm just worried about dad. He should lose weight, start exercising, eat healthier. You are so stuck in your ways you don't even see how you're hurting yourself and others.”

I point to the stack of pork chops. “Seriously, those can be deadly.”

Mom sighs heavily, and I realize that I may have said too much. “Are you saying that his diabetes is my fault? That I'm trying to kill your father?”

That didn't come out right. I shake my head. “No, of course not.”

“He's a grown man. And what makes you think you're so smart? Smarter than everyone, including doctors and dieticians?”

I rinse the peeled potatoes in cold water, wishing I could put my head under the stream as well to cool my cheeks.

Why does Mom have to take it so personally? I simply want what's best for them.

In the calmest voice I can muster, I say, “No, Mom. That's not what I'm saying. But doctors are not gods. They don't teach them about diet in medical school. Besides, big pharma is a profitable business. They can't be telling people to eat broccoli—there's no money in it. You can't patent broccoli and sell it for hundreds of dollars a bunch.”

“You're so naïve—eat some broccoli and be cured! If things were only that simple!”

I pour the dressing over the salad and mix everything.

“But, it is simple!” I say. “Of course, there are no guarantees, but why not at least try?”

The door to the kitchen burst open. “My grandfather ate everything he wanted, he smoked cigarettes until the last day of his life, and he lived to be eighty-nine. Everything in moderation is fine,” I hear Dad's voice as he comes in. “Why don't you two join us already? People are getting hungry.” He picks up a couple of wine glasses and goes back to entertaining the guests, who are now laughing loudly at some joke.

I finish mixing the salad and take the bowl into the living room. When I return, I say, “Some people have strong bodies and good genes, even despite a terrible diet. It's all about improving your odds,” I say. “Look, Mom, all I'm saying, there are doctors who are treating patients with diet and lifestyle changes, and dad should look into that. I'm not saying he shouldn't listen to his doctor. Just get a second opinion.” I wait for a response as she starts scrubbing the kitchen sink. From where I stand, it looks spotless.

“You know how he hates going to doctors,” Mom says. “I'm glad he sees Dr. Ratajczak regularly. I don't think I can convince him to see

another one.”

“Then just have him read the book and change his diet. It's not like I'm telling you to do something drastic.”

Dad enters the kitchen again, and says, “I looked at those recipes you gave me. They seem so ... blah. Life is about enjoyment. What would be the point of that?”

We've had this conversation a thousand times.

It's an argument I can't win.

Mom takes out a wooden board and starts pounding on more pork chops. How many of these do we need? She could feed an entire army.

“He shouldn't be eating so much fat and animal protein. All these pork chops, pigs' knuckles, ribs, and kielbasa are contributing to his problems.”

“He has diabetes, not heart disease.”

“It's all connected. There's only one body, and once you fix your diet and lifestyle, you can get rid of most of the diseases, it doesn't matter what they're called.”

“That's nonsense. All diseases are not the same.”

“They have the same origin. Poor diet and lifestyle.”

“Your father and I wanted you to become a doctor, like your sister, but you didn't want to. So now, don't act like one. Let real doctors do their job.”

The oldest of our bunch, Monica, is a doctor, a great accomplishment by my parent's standards. Well, by anyone's standards. I love my sister more than anything, and I have to admit I'm jealous of her. Not about the fact that she is a doctor (it's something I never even considered), but about how clear she's always been about her passion and purpose in life. And how proud our parents are of her.

She's smart. She's beautiful. And now, she's in Africa, helping the poor and sick children with her colleagues from Doctors without Borders. I mean, how more perfect can one be?

At least, I have a decent job now, but compared to Monica, I'm a total under-achiever. And did I mention she's drop-dead gorgeous?

Her only flaw is that she's still not married, which puts even more pressure on my brother and me to tie the knots. Overpopulation or not, my parents want grandchildren and lots of them.

“I didn't want to study medicine because I'm interested in health,

not disease,” I say.

Mom pours a generous amount of oil onto the frying pan and starts breading the pork chops. I cringe, thinking of all the fat and calories.

“Just listen to what you’re saying. It makes no sense,” Mom says.

“Medicine is a study of disease, not health. They only teach doctors about what is wrong and how to fix it. Doctors know little about health, and yet we treat them like gods. Which they are, in a way. They decide about life and death every day.”

Mom pretends that she didn’t hear me. “I’m making tea, do you want some?”

“There is a difference between being health-oriented and disease-oriented. Western medicine focuses on diseases.”

Mom waves her kitchen towel at me. “You’d like everyone to become vegan and exercise. Like that will cure all diseases and save the world.”

I nod and smile. “It would be a step in the right direction. Although, you can be vegan who’s not healthy. My point is modern medicine is not a science of healthy living. When you go to a doctor, their concern is to get rid of symptoms, not restore health.”

A loud crash of breaking china interrupts my tirade.

“There. See what you made me do?” Mom says. Like it’s my fault that she dropped her favorite teacup on the floor.

“What you’re talking about it’s unrealistic. Besides, diseases are normal; they come with age. We’re not going to live forever, no matter what we do or eat.”

I help my mom pick up the broken pieces and say nothing. Because what is there to say?

I check the potatoes. They’re soft and mushy. I put them on the platter and walk into the living room. “I was just telling Mom that you should be more mindful of what you eat,” I tell Dad. “All this fat and animal protein—is not good for you,” I say when I get back to the table.

“I need protein. And fat isn’t a problem. I have diabetes, not heart disease,” Dad repeats what Mom has told me word for word like it’s their mantra. “Besides, diet nothing to do with it. It’s all in the genes. There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Some people just got handed out a bad set of genes.” Uncle

Janusz nods grimly.

“Yeah, sure. But having bad genes doesn't mean you'll get sick. Did you even read the books I bought for you?” I ask Dad.

“I skimmed through them. But my doctor is telling me something different. Why should I believe some hack who publishes online?”

Peter chuckles. “Hack? I think you mean quack.”

“Yes. A quack. You can't believe everything you read in on the Internet. Today anybody can get published.”

“He isn't a quack. He helped thousands of people get rid of diabetes medications with a healthy diet. He's a real doctor, and he's in New Jersey. His name is Joel Fuhrman. You should go see him.”

“You can't cure diabetes just by eating salad and broccoli,” Dad says, waving his hand. “If that were true, everybody would do it, and there would be no diseases.”

“That would put doctors and pharmaceutical companies out of business.”

“Don't start with your conspiracy theories, Ola.”

Peter starts laughing. “You're becoming a freak, you know that? Soon you'll join an extremist group that blows up chicken coops and McDonalds,” he sneers.

So that's what they think? That I'm a weirdo and an extremist? “I'm sorry, but I have to go.” I get up, pick up a few dirty plates, and go into the kitchen. I've had enough of family interactions for the day.

“Why so soon? You haven't eaten anything yet,” Mom says.

Why do we have to argue every time we share a meal?

It's not like I want that; it just happens.

“I'm still stuffed after last night. And I have work to do,” I lie.

Mom puts the platter with roasted meats on the table, and then another one with fried pork chops next to it.

“You work too much,” she says. “Sitting at the computer is not good for your spine and your eyes.”

“It was great to see you all,” I say, waving a general goodbye.

I have to get out of there as soon as possible, even if it means leaving in mid-sentence. Waiting for Mom to stop talking can mean staying for the night.

On my way home, I keep mulling over the conversation in my head. Why don't my parents get it?

Okay, so they don't care about the animals, the environment. I've told them many times that animal agriculture is the second-largest

contributor to human-made greenhouse gas emissions after fossil fuels and a leading cause of deforestation, water and air pollution, and loss of biodiversity. Still, they don't seem to take those facts seriously. Can't they at least understand the power they have over their health?

And why does talking to my parents about those topics always have to end in a fight?

It's not like they're bad or stupid people; quite the opposite.

So why can't they see the truth?

9.

As I'm walking to my car, my phone beeps. It's a text from Grace. "Meet us tonight for a marathon of rom-coms and yoga?"

I smile at the thought. I could use a day of binge-watching of holiday rom-coms, but yoga sounds like a bit much.

Me: "YES! to rom-coms, but NO! to yoga. Too stuffed to exercise! [Sad face emoji]."

Her: "Can't do. It's a 2-in-1 deal. Plus, exercise helps burn excess calories from overeating."

I cringe and type: "Too much twisting increases the risk of abdominal explosion."

Then again, I could use some exercise. I hesitate before hitting the send button. I back-space, deleting the message, and start over.

"Are you sure they're open? It's Xmas Day?!"

"This is New York City. Here even yoga never sleeps," Grace texts back.

Going through the motions of sun salutations will be challenging after all the pierogi and borsch I've devoured but can also be relaxing and therapeutic. My family keeps worrying about my posture, and yoga is perfect for the spine. As long as there are no inverted poses, I think I could do it.

"OK, but no headstands!" I type. "They make me throw up."

"Whatever you say, beautiful ;-)" is Grace's response.

"C U in an hour?"

"OK!"

And so we have a date.

An hour later, Grace, Kristina, and I are changing in our fashionable yoga attire.

I tell them in detail what happened on the ice rink on Christmas Eve.

“Russell Stone kissed you?” Kristina gasps.

“Yes.”

“Oh, that's so romantic.”

“Ewww...” Grace cringes. “No, it's not. You don't even know him.”

“He's a celebrity. Everyone knows him,” Kristina protests.

Grace ignores her. “Was it a consented kiss?”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean—did he ask if he could kiss you?”

“No, we didn't discuss it. One minute we were dancing on ice, and the next thing I know, it sort of happened...”

Grace shakes her head with disapproval. “Girl, that's the problem in our culture. Schmucks like that, feeling they have the right to take what they want when they want it.”

“He's not a schmuck,” Kristina protests. “He's a famous chef. Don't you know romance always starts with a kiss?”

“FYI, rom-coms aren't real. And neither are fairy tales,” Grace says matter-of-factly.

“You don't have a romantic bone in your body,” says Kristina, which is not true. Grace just isn't into the touchy-feely stuff that Kristina loves so much.

“Guys kiss girls and princesses and orphans all the time, but they never bother to ask consent,” Grace says. “Don't you think it's a problem?”

“Depends who's kissing. If he's a prince or a hot guy, why would it be a problem?” Kristina asks.

“And what if he's not? Let's say he's the most disgusting person in the world, and you hate his guts?” Grace says. “I mean, he could be a serial killer, or—worse—for all you know.”

“Russell Stone is not a serial killer!” Kristina protests. Then she looks at Grace and asks, “What could be worse?”

“A Republican,” Grace laughs.

“A slaughterhouse worker. Or a butcher,” I offer more options.

“Or—” Grace continues, “—someone who is a renowned chef, who prepares animal flesh for a living, and does it on camera, in front

of millions of people every day. Someone who made a career out of it and is making millions off their misery.”

“Like Russell Stone,” I say, and Grace nods. “How about someone who just loves eating meat?” I add.

“Stop it!” Kristina demands. “You’re getting unreasonable. That would exclude pretty much everyone on this planet,” she points out. “Don’t you think that putting such restrictions on whom you can kiss or who can kiss you will drastically limit your options of ever finding your soulmate? You can’t be so selective.”

“You think I’m being picky? How about an atheist, a Jew, or a Muslim?” Grace says to Kristina, who is a Roman Catholic, and often says that she’ll only get into a relationship if the guy shares her deepest values, including her religious beliefs.

Kristina shrugs. “I guess you’re right. The fact that he is a celebrity may have clouded my judgment a little.” Then she adds, “But religion is different.”

“How so? Are you saying that excluding someone based on religion is okay, but because they exploit innocent beings is not?” Grace asks provocatively.

Kristina frowns. Even though my friends went vegan last year, Kristina is not as serious about it as Grace and I. Kristina is mostly doing it for her health, which bothers me a little. I suspect her being religious may have something to do with it. After all, Roman Catholics believe that God gave people complete dominion over the earth and all non-human animals. Which pretty much means that people can do whatever they want and not worry about the consequences to the planet or their conscience. (There’s no point in saving this world if we’re here only in passing before our souls achieve eternal life, and animals don’t matter, because they don’t have souls.) Grace’s motivation is more about stopping cruelty to the animals and justice for all beings, which I deeply believe as well.

And whatever their reasons, I appreciate the fact that when we eat out together, we only choose vegan places.

I decide to change the topic and tell my friends what I read online about Russell’s ex-girlfriend allegations.

“Case in point! So, the guy has made his career of handling body parts of slaughtered animals on camera in front of millions. And—he’s a stalker!” Grace announces her verdict.

“Anyway, it’s a non-issue, cause I’ll never see him again,” I say.

10.

It's time for power yoga. Our favorite yoga instructor and Grace's girlfriend, Anya Patel, is in India, working on a project for the non-profit organization she supports, so we join a power yoga class lead by Bryan Fest.

"If he asks me to do a headstand, I'm leaving," I say to Grace.

The headstand is the one pose I have no desire to try. I don't know why I have this irrational fear about turning myself (and my world) upside down, but it's something I positively dread. While some instructors put you on the spot and force you to 'challenge yourself,' I hope Bryan isn't one of them.

"I promise," Grace says.

I'm still not entirely convinced. "And if he tells me to?"

"Then I give you permission to say no and run away. Can we go now?" she says.

"Okay, then."

The class is just about to start. I roll out my mat in the last spot available, which is right in front of Bryan. Like it or not, I have no choice. We start with the tree pose and then go right into sun salutations.

"Challenge yourself without judgment," the instructor says.

"Easy for him to say," I whisper to Kristina.

The girl with a red ponytail next to me nods. "With this body, he can twist himself into a pretzel while having morning coffee. Or juice. Or whatever hot yoga instructors drink in the morning."

"A super appetizing pretzel." The girl next to her giggles.

"I could eat a pretzel like that," the redhead whispers back.

"This is a power yoga class, cultivating strength stamina, flexibility, and balance," Bryan says. "But we'll also be working on moving us into the meditative realms of focus and equanimity. As you go through the poses, you'll be tingling from your head to your toes, feeling totally alive, and free of the tension you've been holding on to. You'll feel clear, and you feel connected. Connected to the beauty power and love that's in each one of us."

"Amen," Grace whispers.

Wow, that's a big promise. But it sure sounds good.

"Take a deep breath, everybody," Bryan continues, and I hear a collective inhale as we fill our lungs to capacity. He continues in a

rhythmic, calming voice that is also husky and kind of sexy. I can't believe I'm thinking about that now; I admonish myself internally.

On the exhale, I think that the fact that I have a boyfriend doesn't mean I can't notice that other men exist. So, it hasn't been great between Leo and me. The past couple of months, we've been going through a rough patch of sorts. I attribute most of it to my stress at work and his residency at the hospital. All couples go through that; I'm sure it will get easier with time. Perhaps I should start looking for a new job. Between one sun salutation and the next, I decide to update my resume and email it to a few places to see what happens.

Bryan's voice comes from up close to my ear, reminding us that "only breathing through the nose in this class, no mouth breathing whatsoever. And no talking."

A girl next to me mutters that she wouldn't mind Bryan giving her mouth to mouth, and I chuckle.

Admittedly, he is hot, slender-bodied, with well-defined muscles, one could only ponder how flexible he'd be in bed. I reprimand myself again. Thinking about sex at a yoga class? The fact that the sparkles aren't flying between Leo and me in that department doesn't mean a thing. It's a committed, long-term relationship, not a one-time stand.

"Deep and fluid breath through your nose," Bryan pauses and demonstrates proper inhaling and exhaling technique. "Breathing is the backbone of yoga practice and your whole life. As we enliven and awaken our entire body, make the breath the priority."

I take a few deep breaths as instructed, and roll my head around gently to relax my neck muscles. Now I'm glad I came. So far, the class has been easy and relaxing, and just what I needed. But I'm also beginning to feel something inside of me wanting to be released, heaviness waiting to be unloaded.

"Most tension comes from our reactivity, so keep the breath nonreactive, calm, and fluid, never hold it. If you can't do this, back off, stay out of your ego and make fluid breathing the priority," Bryan says.

Sure, I can do that, I think, with just a touch of sarcasm. I can keep breathing deeply like that all day, calmly and with equanimity. Too bad, I also have to go to work and deal with the mess there, including my jerk-boss. The job that I was so happy to get, which turned out to be a nightmare on so many levels. Completely not what I expected or hoped for. Just thinking about it makes my body tighten again. As if

sensing my negative emotions, Bryan appears in front of me, reminding me to breathe. I inhale and exhale deeply and wonder when we'll be taking a break. All this heavy breathing is making me light-headed.

“Let go of perfection,” he says, piercing me with his eyes.

Easy for him to say. He doesn't have to endure family gatherings that involve eating animal corpses or a job he loathes, with a boss that demands perfection in each and every design detail. The recent client, Stone Enterprises, is a real pain—one of the biggest chains of steak and burger restaurants. The steak must look succulent, with juices practically dripping down the page (or screen), just as in real life. Or better.

Because I don't remember steaks looking like this, even in my steak-eating days, which, admittedly, were a lifetime ago. I resent having to do this, and my boss knows it. As a vegan, I asked to be transferred to a different team, working on other projects, but he keeps ignoring me as if my requests aren't valid. I suspect he's been doing it on purpose—to teach the vegan a lesson.

“There's no such thing as a perfect pose. Yoga is supposed to conform to who we are, not the other way around, so don't worry about pushing yourself hard to get somewhere. Where you're at now is perfect,” Bryan says, and I want to shout out, “My life is not perfect!”

But I only do it inside my head so that no one can hear it but me. I mean, how can one NOT conform? One conforms all the time—to what your boss wants, what the society expects, what your family desires.

My family would like me to have a perfect life, complete with a mortgage and kids by now, even though I'm not ready for that yet. Will I ever be ready? Or will I be forever chasing the dream that's so elusive that I don't even know what it is?

“Respect yourself and don't have any expectations. Do what you can do and leave the rest behind. Remember to stay out of your ego. All you need to do is breathe, move, and sweat.”

Breathe, move, and sweat. I can do that.

I came here hoping to release the tension, but so far, my head is crammed with my usual thoughts and frustrations. Maybe the demons need to get to the surface before they can be expelled. It seems they aren't leaving without a fight.

“Now, everybody, let's take your tail bone to the sky, into what is

called downward facing dog. Your palms are flat on the floor shoulders width apart; your feet are hip-width apart, your heels are moving towards the floor, whether they ever get there or not, it's no big deal.”

As the class continues, the pace picks up, and my mind finally shuts down in harmony with the flow, my body stretching, twisting, and turning, going through the motions that felt intense, challenging, and deeply satisfying.

Being in the first row, I feel on the spot and try hard to keep up with everybody else. Maybe too hard, as Bryan appears in front of me again, reminding me to breathe through the nose. I realize that my face is tense, and my mouth open, a sign of incorrect breathing technique.

“The intensity of your poses is up to you. If you're feeling something, you're doing it perfectly. If you want to feel more, that's okay, but don't feel any more than you can stand. Don't feel any more than you can be nonreactive, so your face can stay calm, and your breath can stay deep because if you start losing the fluidity of breath, you're being counterproductive. If you start reacting to what you're doing, you're building tension.”

After an hour and a half, my mind finally shuts down, and all I'm doing is moving, breathing, and sweating.

“We came here today to let go of what we're carrying, to release the tension and stress that we accumulate daily. We can be uncomfortable, but we don't have to be so reactive,” Bryan says. “Now, let's practice being calm. But let's also use this opportunity to work hard here. Take this opportunity to get strong. If you don't challenge yourself, it's not going to happen. But if worse comes to worst, and you can't hold the pose anymore, just drop to your knees and relax. We're challenging ourselves, but we're also respecting where we're at.”

With each word, I feel my body go deep into the stretch, deeper than I ever thought possible. Suddenly, I feel tears come into my eyes, something inside my body releases, which is unexpected. I don't understand what's happening; it's like a knot dissolving. At first, I try to blink back tears but can't. They keep flowing as I hold the pose as if my life depends on it. I don't feel sadness or any particular pain or frustration, just relief, letting go of emotions that I've been holding on to for too long.

Grace and Kristina glance at me, alarmed.

“What’s going on? Are you okay?” Grace asks, moving her lips silently.

“I’m fine,” I reply as tears keep streaming down my cheeks. I’m embarrassed by my outburst but don’t want it to stop.

It’s as if something inside me has shifted, pushing out a slew of unwanted stuff. Old emotions that kept accumulating over the years; not only they weren’t helping me become who I wanted to be, but they were also preventing it.

“Okay, let’s come back to standing position,” Bryan says. And then he says something that breaks my flow. “Let’s try a headstand, everybody.”

My body freezes and goes into a state of panic.

I am not doing the headstand! I think alarmed.

But as Bryan materializes in front of me, I decide to give it a try. I prepare for the pose and kick my legs up again and again, but keep falling, unable to keep my balance. My eyes well with tears again, this time in frustration.

The perfect class and my equanimity—totally ruined.

I’m back to the usual, messy me.

I wish I could restore that feeling of calmness, but it’s gone.

As we wind down, we do final stretches. At the end of the class, we go into child’s pose, then into Savasana, and lay on the floor for ten minutes in complete silence.

“Namaste, everybody,” Bryan says, dismissing the class. We slowly roll our mats and leave the room in silence.

On my way to the locker, I check my phone and see a text message from Leo. He arrived in Poland okay and had so many places to go and relatives to visit that Aunt Elvira decided to extend her stay for another week. It was fine by Leo because he had more meetings scheduled than he expected; the only thing that worried him was whether I’d be okay. If he stays longer, he’ll miss the New Year party at our friend’s house we planned to attend together. Sweet Leo.

“Stay!” I text back. “I’ll be fine. Have fun you two rascals ;-)”

“I’m exhausted. I think I’ll skip the movies,” I tell Grace outside the yoga studio. I feel like crawling into bed with a cup of hot cocoa.

“What? No way!” Kristina says. “You must watch at least one. It’s our tradition, remember?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make you some cocoa,” Grace says as if reading my mind.

11.

Grace would prefer to live in Manhattan, but can't afford the steep rent, so she has resigned herself to Brooklyn. Her place is a tiny studio at the top floor of an apartment building with stairway access to a rooftop terrace, which isn't really a proper terrace, but a small space with a couple of chairs, a potted plant garden, and a view, a perfect spot to hang out, weather permitting.

This time of the year, the weather doesn't permit it, so we stay inside, sipping hot tea and watching a marathon of movies, mostly romantic comedies of questionable quality.

The ratings don't matter. What matters is a holiday theme and romance. I'm particularly excited to watch the "Christmas with a View," a holiday romance, with a restaurant theme, something about a girl, who works in a restaurant, who falls for a famous chef, who's also a TV celebrity and super hot to boot, which looked promising on preview, but turned out to be a dud.

Once the credits start rolling, we sit in complete silence.

"God, this was awful. I can't believe we watch this crap," Grace finally says, and as if on cue, we burst into laughter.

"Can you imagine this happening in real life?" Kristina shakes her head in disbelief. "Totally unbelievable story."

"Who wants more wine?" Grace asks and frowns. "Rom-coms are the modern version of fairy tales. A woman has to find the man who'll unlock the power within her. As if she couldn't do it on her own. It's pathetic."

I admire the tree in the middle of the room, a big potted plant, decorated with colorful lights and unusual ornaments, a collection of figurines from around the world, mostly Central America, but also India, that weren't meant as the Christmas decorations, and yet look perfect on this original centerpiece. It must have been the Anya's doing, she's very creative.

"The problem is that love often gets confused with chemistry, and there's a huge difference between the two."

"Chemistry alone isn't a good prognosis for a successful, long-term relationship. Because you can have fantastic chemistry and still be wrong for each other."

"Absolutely. That person can be not right for you in all kinds of ways," I say.

“But we're taught in many of these movies that if you have smoldering chemistry and kisses that make the world stop, that means that you love each other—and it doesn't.”

I nod, thinking about the kiss on the ice rink. It definitely made the world stop. But we were also, most definitely, not right for each other. Just proves the point, but it's weird how we're programmed. I wonder if it's more our nature or nurture?

Grace continues, “There's this belief that opposites attract, and they do—chemistry wise, but long-term, the most successful couples are as similar to each other as possible.”

Kristina nods and says, “And how about this idea that love is this instant, unbreakable connection, that it's never any work involved, it's always easy and spontaneous.” She pours herself more tea. “This is delicious. What did you put in it?”

“A bunch of spices I don't even remember. It's a secret recipe.” She winks.

“I sense cardamom, cloves, and maple syrup?” I try to guess what else but give up. All the spices work together in perfect harmony. Each of them is distinct and delicious in their own way, but together, they create something new and unique and even better.

Isn't that how the relationships should be?

The world becomes dreamy around me, and I'm beginning to feel super relaxed. Is that the after-yoga effect, or did she put something more substantial into that tea in addition to spices?

“We're supposed to have those feelings for this other person right away, and that's supposed to solve all the problems. Like—someone kisses you, and it makes the ground move, the wind blow, and the stars shine, and everything just falls into place. Easy-peasy.” Kristina takes another sip. “My relationships were never like that.”

Grace nods, “Mine neither.”

Kristina and I look at her incredulously. What is she talking about? She and Anya really are perfect together.

Grace notices our reaction and adds, “Until I met Anya, it's been a constant struggle. But even now, it takes work.”

“But, you did have the instant attraction, didn't you?”

“Yes,” she admits and continues, “For some people, it works out, but for most, it doesn't. Especially when you get around things like your ethical beliefs and your life goals. Yet we're shown this over-simplified version of what love is, that's very much focused

around the kiss and sex and how great it is, not real life.”

“It’s creepy how similar rom-coms are to fairy tales. When you take away all the frogs singing, birds chirping, and stars falling, you see that what cements it—is that kiss. And after the kiss—it’s done. It’s the same story, over and over.”

Kristina chuckles, “Let’s not forget the dead parents, evil stepmothers, and pumpkin carriages.”

We all laugh. It feels so good to spend time with my friends. I’m fortunate to have them.

“All those relationships in fairy tales are very black and white. You have evil stepmother and stepsisters, and you have the prince charming who’s the love of your life. They never show you working through conflict with ordinary people; everyone is either pure evil or pure good. You’re worthy of reward or doomed.”

“And how about this idea that just because there’s love between two people you have to stay in that relationship forever. There are many reasons why two people may love each other and have it not work out. That instant attraction that will last forever and there’s no going back—it doesn’t happen in real life. Ugh!”

“So, why do we keep watching them?” I ask, laughing.

Kristina shrugs, “Beats me. I just love them.”

“It’s like this cognitive dissonance between my feminist beliefs, and being caught up in a fairy tale and a hot, steamy romance,” Grace says. “Cookies, anyone?”

She goes into her kitchen, which is really a few cabinets in the corner of the living room, with a stove and a side table, and brings a big platter of chocolate chip cookies.

I shake my head. “I can’t eat anymore.”

“Oh, come on! Go for it,” she says, and continues, “And let’s not forget about the kiss. As if by magic, the kiss solves all the problems. So it’s like two people who have spark but haven’t connected yet, or they’re fighting, then a hot kiss, and everything changes, all problems are solved.”

“Don’t you think it’s creepy when that prince comes and kisses the girl when she’s asleep or dead? How is that romantic?”

“It is wrong on so many levels. You’re not getting consent, and a lot of times, the person who’s asleep has never even met you before.”

I reach for the cookie.

“Just the idea that someone would fall in love with you while

you're unconscious based on how you look, and you're supposed to be grateful for that love is creepy. It's supposed to change your life in an instant and be the answer to everything.”

“Or even a surprise kiss, when someone grabs this other person without their consent, that's something that is seen like uber-romantic, so hot, it's something that we all are supposed to want. This passionate moment when someone springs a kiss on you.”

“Wait, are we talking about me? The kiss on the ice-rink?”

They look at each other and then at me. “Well... it was weird; you have to admit,” Grace says.

“Remind me, why do we watch this crap?” I growl.

“Because we love them?”

“How about we watch something else for a change. There's this great sci-fi thriller I read about,” I say.

“Don't even get me started about sci-fi,” Grace says. “That's even more messed up.”

“Really?”

“Really. Look, I love rom-coms, and sci-fi, and action movies, but it doesn't mean I don't see how problematic they are. All these stories that we keep telling ourselves are full of lies. This stuff does get in your head. More cookies, anyone?”

As we sip our teas and eat the cookies, I think about what Grace said. When I consider it from this perspective, I have to admit it was problematic. Without my consent, someone invaded my very private space; intimately touched me.

Especially after learning that the guy may be a stalker, it's even more troubling.

Come to think of it; I feel uneasy thinking how much I internalized all this fairy-tale stuff.

I should call Leo and see how his trip went. I decide to do it after I get back.

Our relationship may not be a fairy tale, but we're perfect for each other—most of the time. And I must cherish that.

12.

Back in my apartment, I keep thinking about Leo and me. Our relationship started when we were very young. Our families knew

each other and spent a lot of time together. Then we went our separate ways, and about a year ago, reunited again.

Do I love Leo? I ask myself. Of course, you do, silly! The fact that there are no sparkles and no butterflies in my stomach at this particular moment doesn't mean a thing. We've been together for so long; I forgot how it feels.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I brush my teeth. My phone buzzes. What is it now? I consider just ignoring it or turning it off, but then I read the text. It's from Mom.

"Dad is in hospital. CALL ME."

I spit out the toothpaste and dial her number.

"Your father had a heart attack. He's stable now. The doctors say he'll be okay," Mom says before I have a chance to ask. By the tone of her voice, I can tell she's on the verge of crying.

"Which hospital?"

"It's in Manhattan," she says, sounding confused. Mom mentioned they were planning to visit Uncle Janusz, who lives on the Lower East Side.

"I'm coming," I say. I run to the door and grab my purse, spilling its contents on the floor, as I search for my car keys.

"There's no need. He's asleep now. They won't even let you see him at this hour."

I hesitate. "Are you sure? I'll come first thing in the morning then," I say.

"No," she replies firmly.

"Why not?"

"You must go to the restaurant in the morning. There's a meeting your father wants you to attend. He insisted I tell you that."

"Can't you cancel?" I ask incredulously. How can Mom be thinking about the restaurant at a time like this?

"Just promise me you'll do it. Marcelina will fill you in."

"The waitress?"

"I believe she's the manager now."

"Okay. I'll be there," I agree, still not convinced. "But when can I see Dad?"

Mom sniffs and says, "You come after, okay?"

"Sure," I reply. I wish I could be there to hug her. "Mom? How are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm fine. Everything will be fine," she replies, almost in a

whisper.

“It sure will. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Goodnight, Ola.”

“Goodnight, Mom.”

I hear her sniffing again, and we disconnect.

I stand there, staring blankly at the door. A heart attack! I can't imagine my father in a hospital bed. In fact, I can hardly picture him anywhere except in the kitchen. At home or the restaurant, he is always making something, peeling and chopping, mixing and whipping, cooking and tasting.

My father had a heart attack!

I still can't believe it. It comes as a shock. But it isn't a surprise. Not to me.

Even though I'm his daughter, I worry about him the same way parents worry about their children. For as long as I can remember, he's had health issues. He suffers from diabetes and is overweight. I tried to persuade him to eat more healthfully, but he never listened. “Stop nagging me,” he'd say, brushing me off. And lately, when I became more health-conscious myself, I kept bringing him books on healthy eating and lifestyle and reversing diabetes, but he didn't want to read any of them.

“Never trust a thin chef. It's a clear sign that he doesn't love his food,” he often told me, half-joking, half-serious. “And where there's no love, food is no good, do you understand? You want me to live on broccoli and spinach, which I hate. If I can't eat the foods I love, what will become of my life? Where'll be the pleasure, the excitement, the passion? Don't you understand? To me, that will be worse than death.”

Now that death knocked on his door, I'm praying that the worst doesn't happen.

I know what the restaurant means to my father; that place is everything to him. It's the most important thing in his life, maybe except for his family, but sometimes I even doubted that. That restaurant and the food are his pride and his life's purpose.

But the truth is the restaurant, and the foods that he loves so dearly are literally killing him. The long hours, the stress of managing people, being on his feet all day in the kitchen, preparing food, insisting on doing it the 'right' way, respecting 'traditions,' which means using

recipes and ingredients that are no good for his waistline, blood sugar levels, or cholesterol. Is it really worth it?

We all need food to live, but we should eat to live, not the other way around. And sometimes I think my father lives to eat.

Is the food—or the enjoyment of it—more important to him than his own health and life? And can't he enjoy healthier foods, for his own and his family's sake? Over the years, I tried to persuade him to take better care of himself, but it felt like fighting a losing battle.

Why does he have to be so stubborn?

Why is it that we cannot help and save those we care about most. Even the best meaning advice is not always welcome or accepted. People must want to save themselves first. Nobody can force them to change.

I certainly couldn't do it. Gosh, I can't even change myself, and there are things I'd like to improve. Not that there is anything wrong with my life, both my employment and boyfriend being more than acceptable. But, if I'm honest, I have to admit that there is nothing particularly awe-inspiring about them either.

My father cares about passion and excitement more than his life. He always tells me to add spice to my life. Is my life deficient in that department? Does it lack spice and passion?

A text message arrives. It's from Grace.

Her: "What's up? How are you feeling? I'm sore all over:-(“

Me: "My dad had a heart attack and is in a hospital:-(:-(“

In an instant, my phone buzzes, and I pick up.

"I'm so sorry! Will he be okay?" Grace asks with deep concern in her voice.

"He's stable right now, so it looks like he'll be fine," I say. "Is my life lacking spice and passion?"

There is a brief pause. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't know," I mumble. "Never mind."

"You should get some sleep."

I glance at my watch. It is 1:30 a.m. "Sorry for calling you so late."

"You know you can call me at any time. Besides, I texted you, remember? I had a telepathic feeling that you were awake. Weird, right?"

"Right."

"So, are you going to see him now?"

"No. He's asleep."

“Tomorrow, then?”

“Mom said I must be at the restaurant first thing in the morning for some important meeting.”

“Then, you must go.”

“I’m just wondering what can be so important. And why do they need me there? Marcelina could take care of it; she’s more competent than I am in that department. Or Aunt Elizabeth. I haven’t been going there for years.”

“It is strange,” Grace agrees. “I guess you’ll find out tomorrow.”

“I guess so.” I sigh. “I’ll go to the hospital after.”

“Let me know how your dad is doing.”

“Sure thing.”

I go to bed but keep tossing and turning, thinking about my father and wondering about the mysterious meeting tomorrow. More than anything now, I want to see my dad but decide to listen to Mom. And with that, I drift off to sleep.

13.

The next morning, I wake up at the crack of dawn. I toss and turn and can’t go back to sleep. I might as well get up and make something special for Dad, I decide. He doesn’t think highly of my cooking, but he won’t think highly of hospital food either once he tries it. From what I’ve read on online discussion forums, the food there can be so bad that whatever I’ll make for him can’t possibly be any worse.

There’s a variety of veggies in my fridge, so a vegetable soup seems like a perfect choice. I also make a green smoothie. My father doesn’t care for smoothies (blended foods are for babies, he always says), but I’ll drink it myself if he doesn’t want it. After about thirty minutes of prep work, cooking, and blending, everything is ready.

I pour the smoothie into a glass container and the soup into a thermos. Then I dress up and put a bit of makeup on to mask dark circles under my eyes. My hair is unruly this morning, so I tame it by pulling it into a ponytail. Satisfied with the result, take my handbag and close the door behind me.

Slightly anxious, I enter the restaurant thirty minutes before eight. I keep wondering what could be so important that my mom wants me there and not in the hospital. And why didn’t my father mention it to

me?

The entire staff is there already, cleaning and tidying, looking busy, and agitated. How strange, I think. Customers won't start to arrive until lunchtime, still a few hours away. A group of cooks and waitresses whisper between themselves, glancing at me. I don't even know them. I recognize Marcelina and wave to her.

As she approaches me, she says, "I'm so sorry about your father. How is he doing?"

"He's okay. Thank you."

I haven't seen Marcelina for a while. She looks different from how I remember her—more polished, almost too elegant for setting tables and overseeing the crew of waitresses and dishwashers.

"What is the meeting about?" I ask.

"If you came here more often, you'd know what's going on."

I glance at her, surprised. Is that a reproach? I want to tell her it's none of her business but bit my tongue. Everybody is upset about what happened to my father, who is also their boss and employer. They must be worried about their jobs.

"What do you mean?" I ask calmly.

She looks me straight in the eye without blinking and says, "The restaurant is in trouble."

"My father never mentioned anything." I frown but hold her gaze.

"Maybe he didn't want to worry you." She picks up a bunch of menus from the table and starts to arrange them in a neat pile. "Things have been pretty tough lately, so when I heard about this show accepting applications, I filled it out."

"What applications?"

"Online."

"No, I mean, applications for what?"

"To be on a television show. The eXtreme Restaurant Makeover. Two days ago, I received a call that we got accepted. The crew is coming today to interview us."

"You did what?" I exclaim. "Did my father know about it?"

"I only told him a few days ago. And then this terrible thing happened..." she pauses.

"You mean, our restaurant on a television show? That's crazy!" I exclaim. No wonder my father had a heart attack, I want to add, but don't. "You must call this off right now," I demand.

"Look, Aleksandra. It's a big deal," Marcelina says, giving me her

unwavering stare. “They do a complete makeover in just days. It’s a chance for the restaurant to get better. The camera crew and Russell Stone will be here any minute now.”

I freeze when I hear that name. “Russell Stone? But, how—,” I mumble. I want to ask her so many questions, but there’s no time for chit-chat as the door to the restaurant burst open. “You should have warned me,” I hiss, giving her the dirtiest look I can muster.

But Marcelina turns away, stretching her lips in a grin so wide I worry her face will split in two as she runs toward the group of people pouring into the restaurant, shouting and pointing in all directions, cameras rolling, recording everything.

Before I have time to think, a man approaches me, extending his hand in introduction, “Hello, I’m Russell Stone, and you are ... Aleksandra?” he says, looking surprised but not as stunned as I must appear with my jaw hanging open. I’m overwhelmed and intimidated by the whole situation, but the fact that he recognized me makes me feel even more awkward.

He, on the other hand, seems entirely at ease and somewhat bemused by my sudden nervousness. “We receive thousands of applications just like yours. Why should we choose you?” he goes straight to the point, not wasting time for small talk.

A woman shoves a microphone right into my face, plus two cameras are rolling, recording everything I say, which isn’t much.

“Umm ... I don't know,” I begin. My cheeks are burning; I wish they weren't recording this, and that I had more time to compose myself and my thoughts.

“Because we want a restaurant makeover,” Marcelina interrupts my gabble, looking Russell straight in the eye with disarming honesty. “Isn’t that what you do?”

He looks at her and back at me. Heat is coming to my face and I feel the beginning of a blush. I must try to compose myself, I panic. *You must appear confident, Aleksandra!* I clear my throat and puff air on my bangs that keep getting in my eyes.

“Yes, of course, otherwise, I wouldn't be standing here with you having this conversation. So what exactly is your position in the restaurant? And who is in charge here?”

“I’m the front manager and a waitress,” Marcelina says.

“And you?” Russell turns to me.

“I am the owner,” I begin. “Umm ... the owner's daughter,” I

stammer and blush, cursing myself in my thoughts for being so awkward.

“So which one is it?” he asks with a smirk on his face. Everyone's eyes are on me now, the camera rolling, recording my every move. I hate myself for this lack of confidence. I need to get over it fast if I don't want to humiliate myself in front of millions on national television.

“So, what experience do you have?” Russell presses on.

“I've been helping in the restaurant for many years.”

“Running it?”

“Helping in the kitchen, sort of.”

“So, you're a chef.”

“Not really. I don't cook. But I can do everything else: prep work, cleaning, washing dishes, waitressing—whatever's necessary.”

“And how long have you been working here?”

I stare at him blankly.

“She doesn't,” Marcelina blurts out.

Russell looks at me, confused, and asks, “Where is Mr. Kwasniewski? Why are you here, and he is not?”

“My father had a heart attack. It happened last night. He asked me to meet with you.”

Russell blinks and looks at me with what seems like genuine compassion. “I'm sorry to hear that. How is he now?”

“Doctors are saying he's getting better.”

“So your restaurant is failing, your father is ill, and you know nothing about managing a restaurant?”

“Well...,” I pause, trying to come up with something insightful to say.

Marcelina steps in. “That's why we applied to this program. Isn't that what you do? Turn around failing restaurants and make them successful?”

“And you are?” Russell turns to Marcelina.

“I'm the front manager,” Marcelina repeats. “And a waitress.”

“You are the one who applied for our help,” he says, and she nods. “Well, I can help a failing restaurant, but I'm not a magician,” Robert says. “I don't perform miracles. I'd come here for three days, but then you'll be on your own.” He starts pacing around. “Convince me. Why should I choose you? This place obviously needs work, but I have to know you stand a chance and that you deserve it.”

“This is my father’s legacy...,” I start.

“Your father is not here. What if he can’t run this place any longer? What will happen then? Who’s going to run it? You?”

I shake my head. “Me? No!” I gasp at the absurdity of his suggestion.

“Then, who? Tell me,” he demands, as he walks into the kitchen. I hear banging, cabinet doors opening and closing, as he pokes around the cupboards. I follow him and can’t believe my eyes. *Bam! Bam! Bam!* I wince as he throws pots on the tiled floor, making an earsplitting noise. A stack of plates slip off the shelf and break into a thousand pieces.

“This is disgusting!” he shouts to the camera, holding a dirty pot in his hand. “And a health hazard!” He points to the pot and then at me and says, “You must be willing to fight for it. This place needs lots of work. You’ll have to change your menu, change your interior, clean up your kitchen, maybe even fire people. Just look how dirty your cabinets are.”

He pushes against one of the sideboards standing by the wall, exposing dirty floors underneath with pieces of rotten food and something that looks like ... mouse's droppings? It can’t be!

Disgusted, I shot an angry look at Marcelina.

Russell continues, “How can you serve food in here? It’s not safe. You should be closed down by the sanitary inspection.” He pauses and looks at me again. The camera turns back to me, following his gaze. With all my will, I try to keep the tears of humiliation from running down my cheeks.

“Are you ready to do what it takes?” Russell asks. “Otherwise, the station’s money and my time will be wasted.”

I inhale deeply and try to speak, but nothing comes out.

Marcelina comes to the rescue again, saying firmly into the camera, “Yes, we’re ready.”

“That’s the spirit!” Russell prizes her.

I shake my head incredulously. “Fire people? Change the menu? My father surely wouldn’t want that!” I say, ignoring Marcelina, who looks at me appalled.

Russell puts the pots away. “Frankly, I don’t have much confidence in you right now.”

Marcelina isn’t giving up. “Isn’t that what you do? Help restaurants that are struggling?”

“Struggling—yes. But this is a total disaster,” Russell declares.

I don’t believe this guy. What a jerk! Who does he think he is?

“This is not a disaster,” I protest. “This restaurant has been in our family for over twenty years, and it’s been very successful until—.”

“Until what?” Russell asks.

I hesitate. Has it been as successful as I think? And how did it get into the state it’s in now? Thoughts are spinning in my head.

I shake my head. This can’t be real. Dad would say something. But then again, maybe Marcelina is right. I should come here more often.

Marcelina turns to me and hisses, “Don’t mess it up, Aleksandra. He can help us. That is the whole point of the show—to help places in desperate situations.”

I can’t believe that woman. “What are you talking about? We’re not desperate,” I tell her. “It can’t be—”

“Then which is it? Maybe you should get your story straight,” Russell interrupts us. “Look, we have hundreds of restaurants applying for the show each week. We must pick carefully. With limited time and resources, we can’t help everybody. And the program airs only once a week—”

“Okay, that’s enough,” I interrupt him. “I’m sorry you wasted your precious time, but this meeting is over. It was nice meeting you,” I say. Marcelina glares at me, I can feel her piercing stare on my face, but I ignore it.

“Wait,” Russell says, motioning to the cameraman to stop filming. “Don’t you want us at least check up the place? I need to let my bosses know my opinion.”

Marcelina nods. “You haven’t even seen the whole place yet or tried our dishes. What else do you need to know? I’ve been working here for seven years and can tell you everything there’s to know,” she adds.

I look around at the mess this big-shot chef has made. Why did she even ask him to come here? The whole idea suddenly seems outrageous. Marcelina is crazy to consider it. There’s no way I will let my father go through that. Even if the restaurant is in trouble, which I doubt is true, there has to be a better way.

Surely things aren’t that bad. And even if—how bad can it be?

I pick up a pot from the floor and notice my hands are shaking. In fact, my entire body is shaking. I take in a deep breath and try to calm myself down. But what worked in the yoga studio, isn’t working so

well now.

“Do you really think I’ll let this man trash my father’s restaurant on national television?” I hiss at Marcelina. “While he’s lying in a hospital bed? He just had a heart attack. What do you think he will have when he sees that video? A total meltdown?” I turn to Russell and say, “This is your specialty, right? That’s what your viewers crave? Trashing the places and humiliating the owners. It boosts your ratings through the roof.” He doesn’t respond, so I continue, “Look, I’m sorry that we’ve bothered you, but you’re wasting your time. This whole thing is a huge mistake. It just won’t work.”

Marcelina glares at me, astonished, but I ignore her. She may know what’s best for the restaurant, but I know what’s best for my father. I realize the camera still keeps rolling, recording my every word. “Stop that camera now!” I shriek.

Russell raises his eyebrows and motions to the cameraman to stop filming. “Okay, as you wish. But you’re burying your chances. If you don’t give us the information, we won’t even consider you.” He sounds like a broken record.

Who does he think he is? Still shaking, I turn around and trudge into the kitchen, trying not to trip on the broken pottery, to let him know that this conversation is over.

My head is spinning. There must be a better way. Worst come to worst, Dad could just sell the place. He’s too old and too ill to work so hard. Surely someone would buy it. Or maybe he could declare bankruptcy or whatever one people do in impossible situations.

One thing I know for sure—I won’t let this jerk tear apart my father’s restaurant on national television.

After the crew is gone, Marcelina throws her apron at me and leaves. Several cooks and waitresses whisper between themselves and look at me as if I’ve murdered their mothers. A few others give me applause and thumbs up, but that may be sarcasm.

Could it be that the restaurant is in trouble?

Whatever it is, I have to get to the bottom of it quickly. But first, I want to see my dad. I hope he feels better soon.

Thanks for reading!

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